

CORAL

A Sequel to "Carnival"

COMPTON MACKENZIE



Coral

the sequel to "Carnival"

In this sequel to "Carnival" the author skilfully interweaves the subsequent histories of some of his most brilliant fictional characters into a charming love story dealing with a younger generation. Coral, the heroine and central figure, hater of conventions, in the fascination of youth and enthusiasm would count the world well lost for love. A striking contrast to her tenderness and self-abandonment stands out her lover, concealing a deep love under an assumed brusqueness. In his clever and amusing descriptions of the foibles of both worlds of the social sphere, in his masterly drawing of life and character—above all, perhaps, in the beautiful little cameo that will make Iris one of the immortals among the children of fiction — his admirers will find full justification for the esteem in which this popular author is so widely and so deservedly held.

**COMPTON
MACKENZIE**

Author of "The Old Men of the Sea," "The Altar Steps," etc.

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CORAL

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Old Men of the Sea

The Heavenly Ladder

The Parson's Progress

The Altar Steps

The Vanity Girl

The Passionate Elopement

Carnival

Sinister Street, Vol. I.

(*In America :*

Youth's Encounter)

Sinister Street, Vol. II.

Guy and Pauline

(*In America :*

Plashers Mead)

Sylvia Scarlett

Sylvia and Michael

Poor Relations

Rich Relatives

The Seven Ages of Woman

Santa Claus in Summer

CORAL: A Sequel to "Carnival"

By COMPTON MACKENZIE



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UPB

To
T. W. RIDLEY
In Memory of Much Kindness.

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CORAL

CHAPTER I

DAIRYMAIDS ROW

IN one of the six little old houses known as Dairymaids Row, Islington, a little woman peered anxiously out into the deepening blue of the October dusk. She had not yet lighted the gas, and as much of the dull fire in the hob-grate as was visible under a large kettle did more to enhance than relieve the steady darkening of the sombrous room in which she was waiting for her nephew to come home. Immediately outside, the pavement did not echo to even so much as a footstep; but from the streets to right and left, which were linked by this antiquated thoroughfare, the hoots of motors and the rumble of heavy traffic assured the watcher that life was still going on.

Why was Frank so late for his tea? He had promised to be home before six. Could anything really terrible have happened to him? At the prompting of a sudden fear she flung up the window and leaned out in the hope of seeing the expected one turn round the corner and come this way. But nobody entered from either end. There was only a stream of indifferent people hurrying past in silhouette against the golden fogs of Upper Street and Essex Road, shadows passing so swiftly across her strained vision that the squat posts which guarded Dairy-

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maids Row against the invasion of anything wider than a hand-barrow seemed in comparison to possess a more veritable humanity. The autumnal darkness struck sharp and chill from the towering black wall of the warehouse opposite upon the little woman, who gave one more glance to right and left before with a shiver she drew back into the room and found that it was by now so dark within that the day-long gas-jet was glimmering above her like a watery star. She climbed on a chair and flooded the mantle, the sickly incandescence of which made the room and the ashen skeleton of a starved fire appear more desolate.

"Why doesn't he come back?" she groaned.

The state of the fire gave her an opportunity to distract herself by reviving it with faggots and fresh coal, with poker and with bellows, until it blazed fiercely. The kettle, which had been sitting on the hob like a mute at a funeral, was set to ride the crackling coals and forced to sing again.

Suddenly the little woman crouching by the fender looked round in affright over her shoulder.

"I haven't drawn the blinds," she whispered in a dry voice. "Fancy me messing about all that time over the fire and never noticing I hadn't drawn the blinds! And it's inky black outside now."

She tried to gather enough courage to cross the room and pull down the blinds, but she was dismayed by the opacity of the window-panes dreadfully glistening, aware that it was a false opacity and that here she knelt huddled in this bleak light, the prey of any eyes that might regard her loneliness, of any hands that might break in to rob and even to kill her. She tried to laugh at herself, and it was as if she were squeezing a talking doll whose mechanism was worn out, for no sound came from her lips, and if it had come she would hardly have recognized

Dairymaids Row

it as her own voice. She really must pull herself together. Suppose Frank did not return for hours? Was she going to kneel here until he did?

"I *am* a silly thing," she declared, and with this accusation of herself she gazed up apologetically at the framed photograph of a girl's head that hung over the mantelpiece. "Well, you used to feel frightened yourself sometimes," she reminded it.

The little woman rose from her knees and straightened the frame, in doing which she felt as if she were touching that sister long dead, pulling down the collar of her coat, as it might be, so that her fears were allayed and she was able to walk calmly over to the window and draw the blinds.

It were useless to attempt a description of the girl in the photograph. If the original likeness had ever possessed any character, which is improbable, the enlargement of it to life-size had effectually removed that character. It was now just a head tilted on one side with a photographer's smile showing a row of small even teeth, a pair of photographer's shoulders, and a pair of photographer's hands veiling the breast with a bundle of photographer's tulle. It were more profitable to seek in the lineaments of the living sister a trace of that so exquisitely clear-cut personality long ago lost to this world. May Raeburn between forty and fifty did not look nearly her age, and this not because fashion allowed womanhood in those days a youthfulness that with each new lustrum was more generously protracted, but because May's own mind had never developed. She who had relied utterly upon her sister when she was alive relied as utterly upon her now when she had been dead over twenty years. That hideous enlargement always spoke to her with the authority of a revered oracle. The responsibility she had accepted of bringing up her sister's

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boy had not aged her, for in bringing him up she had cast away the years and become a child like him. It was easy so long as Frank remained a child; but when he grew up she felt herself being left behind and on the horizon she apprehended the looming of a dim loneliness that terrified her. And this was not the loneliness inflicted upon her by his widening interest in the world, but such a positively physical loneliness as she was suffering to-night, such a childish terror of the London bogies as had made her breath come quick and her heart beat fast upon this October evening. Yes, she seemed young enough. There was not a line upon her ivory face; her slanting eyes were bright and innocent, yet withal wary as those of a nested thrush. The years had been kind to her figure. Her hunch was now scarcely noticeable. She merely seemed smaller than most women, smaller and more fragile. In fact she was strangely of a piece with the house in which she lived. Dairymaids Row when it was built some time toward the close of the eighteenth century would not have appeared remarkable architecture. No doubt it was originally a row of cottages built by one of the Islington farmers for his dairymaids. Gentility, when Islington began to grow during the early part of the nineteenth century, may have added the spiderweb fanlights over the doors, the homely panelling, the brass handles and bolts, and the steps with their railings like attenuated pagodas. Since then for over a hundred years Dairymaids Row by remaining unaltered had achieved architectural distinction. Some privilege of ancient lights, or maybe some old right of way, had preserved it amid the welter of progress. Warehouses reared their ugly bulk behind it and before it; but the world passed it by and went on its dreary commercial way along Upper Street and Essex Road. The warehouses which at first

Dairymaids Row

had threatened it were the cause of its ultimate tranquillity, for they made it too narrow to be used by vehicles, and it was of little service to foot-passengers. May Raeburn did not belong any more to the world than Dairymaids Row, and she was just such another little old-fashioned thing.

CHAPTER II

FRANK

IT was after nine o'clock when Frank arrived home and flung himself dejectedly into the arm-chair by the fire.

"You couldn't get back for tea, then?" his aunt mildly inquired. Something in his attitude warned her not to reproach him with being so late.

"No. I went right out to Croydon to see about that place advertised in *The Times*. The one the fellow wrote about."

"And it wasn't any good?"

"No. He was suited this afternoon."

"But he wrote and asked you to call, didn't he?" she went on.

Her nephew nodded moodily.

"And it was filled up?"

He nodded again.

"Never mind. Perhaps there'll be something better in to-morrow's paper."

"Not in *The Times* there won't be," Frank growled.

"Why not? You never know."

"Because I've finished with fellows who advertise in *The Times*. They're all alike. They think it's what they pay for, to get a chap like me to go fooling out to Croydon after them. Thanks very much, I bought my last copy of *The Times* this morning."

"I expect you're feeling a bit tired and hungrified, aren't you? Wait a bit, and I'll make you a nice cup of tea. The kettle's been on and off the boil these three hours and more."

"That's all right, auntie. I'm ready when you are."

He watched her preparations in silence, wishing that he could tell her about some amusing adventure of his to make up for the hours he had kept her waiting; but he was too much disappointed by his own long day of waiting about to be interviewed by the owners of cars who required a chauffeur sober, single and careful. He leaned back in the arm-chair and fell into a resentful silence, brooding upon the inequality of human existence.

"I was a bit scared earlier in the evening," his aunt confided while she busied herself over the tea. "It was so quiet. I thought anyone might break in and murder me and no one be any the wiser."

Frank laughed a little unsympathetically.

"What would anyone want to murder *you* for? Don't be so silly, auntie. You work yourself up. Anybody would think to hear you talk that people went about murdering for the fun of the thing."

"Well, people do get murdered," she insisted.

"Yes, but it's usually for a reason. You don't suppose somebody's going to creep up Dairymaids Row with a hatchet and . . ."

His aunt screamed, and nearly dropped the kettle.

"Don't talk like that, Frank! You're wicked to talk like that! You'll frighten me so as I shan't know what I'm doing next."

He laughed again. It was a kind of relief to his despondency to tease his poor little aunt. He did not really want to be unkind to her, but it irritated him that she should work herself up into a state over imaginary horrors without apparently being able to understand what it meant to him to be out of work now, at the very moment when he most wanted money to provide material for his invention.

Coral

"Well, really, you know, auntie, you are a bit silly. Think of all the people you've ever known, and tell me how many of them was murdered."

His aunt stared at him for a moment, and then turned to the photograph over the mantelpiece as if she were asking its advice.

"Now, that's enough about murder," she whispered.

"I didn't start the subject," he pointed out. "But if I don't get a job soon, I shall take to murder myself. And that's a fact."

To his amazement she flung herself down on her knees beside his chair and seized his wrist.

"Don't say such a dreadful thing, Frank! You don't mean it. Say you don't mean it," she cried.

"Good lord, auntie, keep your hair on. You don't really suppose I shall take to knocking people on the head for a living."

"Well, don't say such things even in joke," she begged. "Promise me, Frankie, you won't never say such things even for a joke."

"All right, all right," he muttered, feeling embarrassed by his aunt's hysterical behaviour. "But if I can't get a private chauffeur's job in the next two days, I'm going to see what I can do in the taxi line. It's no good you arguing about it, auntie. I'm not going to loaf about any longer, and that's flat."

This threat of her nephew's to become a taxi-driver was another nightmare to his poor little aunt.

"You're mad to do such a thing," she grumbled. "I know I haven't got too much money, but I'd sooner spend every halfpenny and sell every stick of furniture I had than for you to go driving a taxi. You'll only pick up with some common, vulgar girl and make a fool of yourself and go marrying her."

"I'm not going to marry," Frank said confidently.

"Don't you worry about that. I've got too much to do."

"Inventing, I suppose," his aunt commented bitterly, for she was by now thoroughly upset. "Well, I'd as soon you wasted your time and your wages on inventing as go wasting them on low, common girls you went driving around in taxis."

This was too much for Frank. He did not mind being accused of getting off with girls through the medium of a taxi, but to have such an occupation put on a level with his inventing was beyond his sense of humour. He sprang out of his chair, and without drinking his tea or saying a word to his aunt he stalked upstairs to bed.

When she came into his room on tiptoe half an hour later he was fast asleep. She left some bread and butter by his side in case he should wake and be hungry. It was hard to resist the temptation to bend over and kiss his forehead; but it was her own fault, she told herself, and with teardrops trickling down her pale cheeks she left him, stopping to listen for a moment in the passage in case he should wake and call her back to be friends. But there was no sound.

CHAPTER III

DESTINY

AT the other end of London, in the Orient Theatre, just as May Raeburn closed the door of Frank's room, the curtain came down upon the second act of the successful revue *If Pigs Had Wings*.

Mrs. Avery, sitting in the stalls between her son Lucius and her daughter Coral, turned to each of them and declared enthusiastically how glad she was that they had come.

"Quite the best thing we've seen since I don't know how long. I can't think why your father would insist on staying at home. He says that revues bore him; but I'm sure nobody could be bored by *If Pigs Had Wings*. There hasn't been a dull moment."

"I think it bores him to come out with us," drawled Lucius, a dark stripling of about eighteen, who in a few days would be going up to Oxford and thought that it was not only seemly to be bored oneself by everything, but also to attribute boredom as the prime motive force of everybody else.

"What rot, Lucius!" his sister exclaimed angrily. "What unutterable rot you do talk! It doesn't bore him in the least to come out with us, but it jolly well bores me to come out with you when you talk drivel like that."

Coral's cheeks were rose-burnt with exasperation; and Mrs. Avery looked round at the audience through her lorgnette, for she disliked her daughter's outbursts and wanted to create a diversion.

"Isn't that Lord Clarehaven with his mother, Mrs. Houston, over there in the third row back from us? "

"It may be," said Coral indifferently, not taking the trouble to look round.

"Really, my dear child, your manners get worse and worse," her mother protested. "Quite boorish."

She felt inclined to lecture Coral on her social obligations; but she supposed that such a lecture would be even more than usually ineffective delivered in the stalls of the Orient, and she checked herself.

The three of them sat in silence for the rest of the interval: Mrs. Avery brooding on the difficulty of managing daughters, Coral on the stupidity of all the young men she knew, and Lucius on the misfortune of being three years younger than his sister.

"I don't think the last act was quite as good as the others," Mrs. Avery said when they were making their way out through the slow crush.

Lucius gave the number of their car to the commissioner, and they waited for him in the vestibule to bring it round. The dampness had turned to rain, and Mrs. Avery rejoiced to think that they had a car and that they should not have to go splashing through the mud in the pursuit of hard-hearted taxis, or even worse, go surging into the tube like rubbish down a drain. Several minutes went by, and then Mrs. Avery beheld their commissioner occupied in assisting another party into a car.

"You told him our number, Lucius?" she asked indignantly.

Lucius perceived that he was going to be unpleasantly involved, and tried to fend off the complication.

"All right, mother, don't get so excited. He'll call up ours in a minute."

"But, my dear, those people were long after us. Please go and find out where ours is."

Coral

"Well, wait a minute," Lucius parried.

"Oh, you self-conscious little funk, I'll go," Coral exclaimed. She ran down the steps and intercepted the commissionaire before he was off on another wild whistling chase along the wet pavement.

"You've given him the wrong number, you fathead," his sister shouted from the kerb. Lucius flushed darkly, for at that moment Mrs. Houston bowed to his mother as she passed out, and Clarehaven, her son, who was going up to the House next week, must have heard what Coral said.

"Evening, Avery," said Clarehaven.

"Evening, Clarehaven," said Lucius.

"What a wonderfully preserved woman Mrs. Houston is," Mrs. Avery commented. "Were you a great friend of her boy's at Eton?"

"No, I knew him, that's all. He's called Lucius, like me. He was rather an ass."

"You've given him the wrong number, Lucius," Coral shouted again more loudly.

"Do go down, my dear boy, and see what's the matter."

Lucius went more willingly now that there were scarcely any people left waiting in the vestibule. Mrs. Avery watched her children arguing for a minute, and then saw Lucius go off along the road with the commissionaire.

"The usual muddle when you ask Lucius to do anything," Coral commented when she rejoined her mother in the vestibule.

Mrs. Avery was once again tempted to lecture her daughter on the proper attitude for a sister to adopt towards her younger brother; but Coral, tall, fair, and angry, was not an easy victim, and she thought better of it. Presently Lucius came back with the astonishing

news that the car was nowhere to be found. This statement the commissionaire supported so positively that not even Coral ventured to suggest that it was his fault.

"I was just coming back, ma'am, to say forty-seven wasn't nowhere around here, and to ask what kind of a car it was. But this young gentleman can't see your car nowhere. Your man must have mistook the theatre perhaps. Was it a hired car?"

"No, of course it wasn't hired," Mrs. Avery snapped. "It was my own car. I can't understand it. The performance isn't over earlier than usual to-night? I said a quarter to eleven."

"It's gone a quarter-past now," the commissionaire pointed out discouragingly.

"I thought Digby was drunk when we started," Coral announced. "He's probably had a smash."

"Drinks, does he?" The commissionaire clicked his tongue. "Oh dear, that's bad when a chauffeur does that. That's very bad, that is."

It always made Mrs. Avery cross when Digby was criticized, and for Coral to accuse him like this in front of a theatre attendant when she could not with any dignity argue the question was infuriating.

"Well, it's useless to speculate why Digby isn't here," she decided. "The important thing to settle is how we are to get home."

"If you care to wait," the commissionaire began, but Mrs. Avery cut him short.

"Please get us a taxi," she demanded.

"I'll do my best, ma'am," he promised. "But it may take a few minutes, being such a wet night."

"I hope Digby hasn't had an accident," she said to her children.

"I don't mind in the least what's happened to Digby,"

Coral

Coral replied. "I only hope the poor car hasn't had an accident."

As she spoke another car pulled up alongside the pavement, and her father jumped out.

"Ah, you're still here," he exclaimed. "That brute Digby has smashed up the Rolls. Drunk, of course. I've borrowed this car from the garage. Come along, let's get home."

His family explained that the commissionaire was calling a taxi for them. They must wait until he came back.

Mr. Avery did not like the prospect of waiting. No doubt he had been upset by the accident to the Rolls and by Digby's outrageous behaviour; but he was not usually so fretful as this over being kept waiting by his family.

"I say, father," Lucius called to him, "do walk along here. The girls are beginning to come out from the stage-door. It's great fun watching them."

"Hang it, boy," his father exclaimed irritably, "hasn't your evening's entertainment lasted long enough? Must you really behave like a provincial excursionist?"

Coral looked at him in astonishment. She was not prejudiced in her brother's favour, but it did seem rather harmless to want to watch all the pretty ladies coming out. The Orient evidently did not agree with father, the funny old thing.

CHAPTER IV

LITTLE QUEEN STREET

THE Averys lived at Number Nine Little Queen Street, Westminster, and they could fairly claim that they lived in the most attractive house in London. Little Queen Street itself was just a typical double row of Georgian houses leading into Brown Square, with its elephantine church in the middle and its plutocratic neo-Georgian houses that were soaring up as fast as the genuine little Georgian houses could be knocked out of the way, soaring up to such a height that in a few years the elephantine church in the middle would look like a mole in a hollow square of scarlet grenadiers.

But Number Nine had really nothing to do with Little Queen Street, and still less to do with the desecration of Brown Square. Its only link with Little Queen Street was the front door, which looked like any other front door till it opened and admitted you, not to a Little Queen Street hall, but to a passage that ran right underneath Number Eleven and emerged in a flagged courtyard. This was regarded enviously by the back windows of every other odd number in Little Queen Street, for there flanking one side of it were three two-storied cottages dating back to the time of Elizabeth, and perhaps even earlier. These, although during the eighteenth century they had been joined together to make one house, still kept their three front doors. The left of the courtyard was bounded by a high wall, against which grew a barren but leafy fig tree, and on the right of the courtyard was

Coral

a fourth cottage joined to the others by a corridor over an archway leading into a second courtyard beyond. There were at present no houses behind. A great stretch of waste ground reached to the Embankment, which was covered with willow-herb every summer, but which, alas ! would be over-built by rubicund blocks of offices as soon as sufficient rich speculators could be found. Such was Number Nine Little Queen Street, Westminster, a gracious and friendly house, haunted, it was said, by the ghost of a dead harlequin.

Supper was waiting for the theatre party in the dining-room, which had a ceiling dedicated to the representatives of the four arts. Thence Handel, Pope, Garrick, and Hogarth, a tremendous quadrumvirate of the Arts, had observed many appetites. Tradition said that this ceiling was put in by an eighteenth-century statesman when his mistress lived here, hard by the scene of his lordship's eloquence. It seemed an inappropriate present.

The drive back through the wet October night in a borrowed car had not inclined the Averys to discuss the unpleasant business of drunken Digby and the ruined Rolls-Royce. However, the sight of the supper-table glittering under the Venetian chandelier, the placid contemplation of the plaster quadrumvirate, and presently the enjoyment of the good things to eat, induced a more expansive mood.

"Did you notice if he seemed drunk when he started?" Mr. Avery asked.

"I told mother he was drunk," Coral replied.

"I didn't notice anything at all odd in his behaviour," Mrs. Avery said.

"Oh, well, mother," said Lucius, dipping a spoon into the *mousse*, "we can't all be as observant as Coral."

"He must have ripened rapidly after he left you at the theatre," Mr. Avery went on. "He piled up the poor old

Little Queen Street

Rolls among the statues by the Houses of Parliament, and he is now lodged in Westminster Police Court. Bright fellow ! ”

“What shall we do about the Riviera trip?” Mrs. Avery asked.

“I’ve telephoned an advertisement for a new chauffeur to *The Times*,” her husband replied. “Anyway, we intended to use the Sunbeam.”

“Well, I hope we shan’t get another Digby,” said Coral.

“Digby had his good points,” said her mother. “He was always very obliging, and he never minded how long I kept him when I was shopping.”

“I don’t suppose he did,” her daughter replied. “There was probably a public-house handy.”

Coral sat up for awhile with her father when the others had gone to bed. On these occasions she dispensed with the formalities of filial politeness, to which she only surrendered at any time in order to avoid tiresome arguments with her mother, who could not bear their omission.

“Tell me, old thing, why you were specially set against coming with us to the Orient?”

Her father puffed violently at his cigar as if he would create a smoke-screen between her deep blue eyes and his.

“A reason connected with my youth, dear Coral, for, strange though it may seem to you, I was young once.”

“Don’t be so ridiculous,” she laughed. “Why, you’re younger than any of us.”

Indeed she did not exaggerate so much. Actually Maurice was close upon fifty, but a fair complexion, a small fair moustache, a complete head of hair untouched by grey, and a slim figure made him look ten years less, and at this moment leaning back in his chair the kindly orange light of his library gave him even more.

Coral

"I'm old enough, anyway, to enjoy being flattered by a pretty daughter," he said with a smile.

"But what *was* the youthful reason?" she persisted.

He shook his head, and flung away the cigar.

"I hope you've been practising your French in preparation for our adventurous journey," he laughed.

"It must be a very serious reason," she said, frowning. "Because, you know, you're not usually very good at keeping a secret about yourself or anybody else."

"My finger is on the switch," he threatened. "If you don't want to bark your shins on my tables and chairs, come at once."

"I do think you might tell me."

"I hope there'll never be any need to tell you," he said gravely.

CHAPTER V

TAILS

FRANK was true to his vow of the night before and deliberately did not buy a copy of *The Times* next morning. Instead, he picked out a place in Kensington from the columns of *The Morning Post* and decided to get rid of his ill-humour and despondency by walking through the Park to inquire after it. The old lady in Kensington Gore who required a chauffeur made an unfavourable impression on him, nor did he flatter himself that he had greatly appealed to her. He left Kensington Gore in a worse humour than ever, and withdrew from the eyes of men into a secluded glade of Hyde Park, where he wandered among the great yellow trees, and beneath the rain-washed blue of the October sky went brooding on the darkness of his future. Twenty-four years old last month, and for all he had done so far of what he wanted to do he might have been four. Should he not have been wiser to stay in the Air Force? Would not his invention have stood a better chance if he had stayed? Had he not been too confident in supposing that he could bring the wonder to perfection on his own? Ah, but if he could, in what a much stronger position he should be. The moment you put on a uniform your soul was no longer your own. Suppose he had gone to his squadron-commander and asked him to help him with money and material, what would have been the result? Why, as likely as not he would have been ordered to hand over his designs, yes, perhaps been told to lay them down on the table

Coral

in the orderly-room. Of course he had been right to trust to himself. But there was no time to waste. This afternoon he would go to that chap in Camden Town who ran taxis. It probably meant harder work than private service, but you were more your own master, and there was always the chance of windfalls. It was all very well for auntie to make such a fuss about it, but she could not expect him to go to her for any more pocket-money. Besides, the pocket-money she could provide would not help him to achieve much. And another thing, he hated sponging on a woman. Why, she wasn't even his mother—or was she his mother? Was all that talk about his father and mother dying when he was still a baby so much eyewash? If she went on at him any more about the vulgar girls he was to get off with, driving a taxi, he should ask her point-blank if she *was* his mother. That would stop her talking all that silly rot about girls in taxis.

Beyond the trees the golden pinnacle of the Albert Memorial flickered in alternate sun and shadow as the cloudy fleet in full sail crossed the limpid sky.

"Ah, if only I had the money I should soon have it finished," he muttered. "And if it was, I should be able to perch like a cock-sparrow on that blinking contraption up there."

He put his hand into his pocket, pulled out his lunch, and sat down on the root of an elm. But he could not so easily tangle the skein of destiny. The root was damp and slippery after the rain in the night. That made him look round for a seat, even though it might cost him twopence. He took the first one and found that on the seat of its partner somebody had left a copy of to-day's *Times*—somebody no doubt who was in the habit of being kept waiting by the lady with whom he trysted in this glade.

It was thus that without breaking his vow Frank read Mr. Avery's advertisement for a chauffeur.

"Write or call between two and three?" he repeated to himself. "Heads Camden Town and a taxi, tails Little Queen Street."

The penny showed Britannia on the back of his hand.

"But mind," he observed to the bland yellow trees, "this is dam well the last of them."

When the parlour-maid opened the door in Little Queen Street and Frank saw the passage leading to the courtyard, he said to her cheerfully as she preceded him through:

"More like Little Queer Street, miss, eh?"

Whereupon she turned and smiled, although her reputation was one of extreme haughtiness.

CHAPTER VI

HEADS

It had been Mrs. Avery who had been instrumental first in engaging the drunken Digby and then in keeping him long after it was obvious to everybody else that he was a thoroughly unsatisfactory chauffeur. Her husband had determined that this time he would be responsible. It was particularly important in view of their Continental trip, which in his own mind he had decided to extend beyond the Riviera, that their chauffeur should either be a perfect machine or a sympathetic human being. Avery did not mind which, but he was determined not to have either an imperfect machine or a disagreeable human being. Suppose he could persuade Constance to find Nice not too unfashionable so early in the autumn, it would be jolly to go down with Coral into Italy.

"What did you say your name was?" he asked Frank, for he had a feeling that he had met this young man before.

"Abel, sir. Frank Abel."

"What part of England do you come from?"

"Islington, sir."

"I seem to have met you before somewhere," Avery said. "Your face is curiously familiar. Where was your last place?"

Frank explained that he had been serving with the Air Force for the last seven years.

"So you've had no experience of private service?" said Avery doubtfully.

"No, sir."

"Oh, well," said Avery after a brief pause, "I don't know that that matters a great deal. I suppose you can give me good testimonials to your character and driving? And no doubt you're a good mechanic, eh?"

"Yes, sir," said Frank with a smile. "I believe I *am* counted a very good mechanic."

When he smiled Avery felt more strongly than ever the sense of a strange familiarity with this young man.

He was certainly prepossessing, as slim and straight as an axle, as dark as an ancient bronze, damson-eyed, with lips red like a rowan, and ears sharp as arrow-heads. Avery noticed his hands stained with oil, and coined a phrase for him in his mind.

"A faun captured by Hephæstus."

It suddenly struck him that their tour through France might give great pleasure to this young man, and he was already aware of a desire to please him.

"Have you ever driven a Sunbeam?"

But as he asked the question he felt that the answer would have as little effect upon the issue to be decided as if he had asked whether, like Phæton, he had ever driven the sun itself.

But he had never driven a Sunbeam.

"I've just had an unpleasant experience. My last chauffeur has smashed up my Rolls-Royce. You don't drink?"

A foolish question! Who was ever known to admit that he drank?

The young man shook his head contemptuously.

"You would come abroad with us next week? I am taking Mrs. Avery and Miss Avery to the Riviera."

"I could come to-morrow," he said.

"That's good. And . . ." Avery hesitated. "My next question may sound rather . . . but are you engaged

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to be married? What I mean to say is, are you going to be sighing all the time to get home? ”

“No, I’m not engaged,” Frank said scornfully.

“To be married,” Avery added with a smile. “But if you accept my wages you are engaged to me.”

“What are you giving, sir? ”

Avery supposed that he ought to take advantage of his evident willingness to come, and, inasmuch as this was his first place, to offer him at least a pound a week less than he had paid drunken Digby. But once again he was caught up by that strange desire to please this young man.

“Five pounds a week,” he said.

Frank flushed with elation. He had not expected more than three. There should be no need now to seek a rich patron. It seemed to him as he walked across the courtyard that he held the future in his own hands. He opened the door at the end of the passage exactly as Coral, returning from a lunch party, reached it on the other side. He stepped back to let her pass, which she prepared to do with what seemed to him a most indifferent ‘ thanks.’ He was seized with an impulse to attract the attention, nay, more, to provoke the interest of this remote young woman; but no doubt he astonished himself more than her by explaining that he was the new chauffeur. She nodded with a gracious smile; and a moment later he was in the empty street, the door closed behind him and that hidden house.

“Well, I’m . . .” he began. He checked the oath and walked away slowly through the benign October afternoon to find an omnibus back to Islington. He was dazed by that brief vision. The elation he had felt when he was first engaged was replaced by another kind of elation. Perhaps for the first time in his life Frank Abel apprehended that the spirit of man might soar to altitudes far

beyond the reach of the most ingenious inventions for lifting his body.

"Yes, but the higher you go the colder it gets," he warned himself. "I reckon she'd be colder than charity if I started flying up to her."

He had reached Dean's Yard, where the roar of the traffic entering this quiet world of Westminster from outside brought him back to his senses. He remonstrated with himself.

"That five pounds a week acted on you like a stiff drink on an empty stomach, young fellow my lad. Haven't you got your work cut out for you? Right! Women and work don't fit in, do they? Right! So that one of them has to go? Right. Well, which has to go? Why, women every time."

He jumped on a motor-bus, and as he made his way toward the vacant front seat he supposed that he had successfully put the vision of Coral out of his mind for ever.

"But she *was* a fine girl," he reminded himself. "And perhaps if I ever think of a way to fly to the moon I'll take her with me."

Then his mind returned to more practical calculations.

"Two hundred and sixty pounds a year. Put it I can live on a hundred easily, I'll have a hundred and sixty pounds for material."

He whistled gently to himself.

CHAPTER VII

GHOSTS

MAY RAEBURN turned from ivory to chalk when her nephew came back and told her the name of the man who had engaged him as chauffeur. She pressed a hand to her heart and stared in agony at the photograph of that dead sister above the mantelpiece. Frank, supposing that she was upset by the prospect of his going abroad so soon, was impatient of the way she received the news of his good fortune.

"I tell you I'm getting five pounds a week," he kept repeating.

"It's not that, Frankie," she whispered. "It's something else."

"Well, what, what?" he urged. Surely she could not have heard anything about that tall girl.

His aunt had turned again to the smiling face over the mantelpiece in a mute appeal for guidance.

"I shall be back in a month or two," he said reproachfully. "You can't expect to have me always with you, auntie."

Yes, he would be back in a month or two, she thought, and perhaps by then she should have found the courage to tell him.

That night May's sleep was fitful and tormented. The wind had risen at dusk. In hollow gusts it boomed round the walls of the warehouses. The faded marguerites in the pots on the sill scratched feverishly upon the panes like fingers, while sometimes the window shook and rattled as if a presence outside was angrily demand-

ing entrance. And once there was a clatter of falling tiles down one of the roofs farther along the row.

"She would have had her birthday to-day," the terrified little woman moaned, pulling the bedclothes over her head to shut out the apparition of her sister's ghost which might be flickering there in the gaslight, did she dare to look. In the close darkness her heart seemed like a frightened animal trying to escape, and her breath came in swishes like heavy rain.

"But she never believed in ghosts herself. Not ever she didn't. When we was kids, and I got talking about ghosts, she used to say she didn't reckon a ghost would ever spring it on her, or, if it did, she'd take jolly good care to put it across any ghost as tried to."

Ghosts? Don't be silly, young May. Black-beetles, yes. Well, anyone has seen blackbeetles. But whoever's seen a ghost? Oh no, not in these, duck! Ghosts? Yes, then you looked again and saw it was mother's lace curtings come back from the wash.

Yes, that was the way Jenny had always laughed at danger of any kind, but in the end . . .

May flung back the clothes in a crisis of nerves, and sat upright in bed staring at the gaslight and listening to the wind.

"Come in! Come in!" she cried. "I'd rather you come back as a ghost, darling, than not come at all. And if you're angry with me, darling, come and tell me so. It's me. It's little May. It's only me. I won't be frightened, Jenny. I won't be frightened or scream or nothing. But come in, come in, come in, and then I'll know what you'd like for me to do about Frank and this place he's got. And it'll make me happy, darling, if you'll only believe it. Because then I'd know for sure that when I die I'll see you again, and we'd be ghosts together. You and me. The same as what we used to

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be. You and me, darling. And you'd tell me if I done right not to say nothing to Frank about all that. He's so set on this place because he wants the money for his inventing. But all the same, if you told me you'd sooner see him beg his bread in the gutter, I'd stop him going. I would. Honest, I would."

The faded marguerites tapped and scrabbled on the pane.

"Must I open the window, my darling?" May asked in a whisper.

For answer the window trembled like a softly shaken tambourine.

May got hastily out of bed and flung up the sash. At once the wind entered like a flight of great black birds. The gas covered upon its jet. A vase of chrysanthemums crashed over. The curtains streamed across the room and flapped like flags. May held her ground for a moment or two. Then a horror of the invading night seized her. She pushed down the sash again and fled back to the shelter of the bedclothes, beneath which she huddled for the rest of the long October night. In the morning she said nothing more to oppose the step Frank was taking.

"For after all it mightn't be the same Avery," she consoled herself. "And, anyway, perhaps he'll leave of his own accord."

CHAPTER VIII

SOUTHWARD

THE Sunbeam was going south. It left the brown Burgundian vineyards behind and overtook the swallows in Provence.

"I can't think why people stay in England at this time of year, Abel," said Coral, who had been sitting by the new chauffeur all the way and had taken a fancy to him.

"No, miss," he replied curtly. He was telling himself that when his invention was perfect there was no reason why anybody with the least pluck ever should stay in England. He drove the car harder along the dusty road. What a poor kind of action a car gave, he was thinking. How slow it was and cumbersome, and how expensive. "You never took up with flying?" he asked Coral.

"No; I've often wanted to, but my father has always been against it."

She felt inclined to be confidential and explain to this young man, who really attracted her much more than any of the young men in her own class she was in the habit of meeting, that since her father allowed her so much freedom, she did not feel that she could do something to which he definitely objected. But she checked herself, remembering that it 'doesn't do' to be too intimate with servants. Yet with every mile nearer to the Mediterranean she felt herself expanding, as might a flower to the richer warmth of the sun, the richer azure of the sky, and to derive from that expansion of her spirit

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a richer warmth and azure in herself, so that she began to wonder if it was not rather absurd, nay even paltry and pretentious, to be thinking about social relations in this country that more than any other retained the stamp of Rome. What in Provence was her great-grandfather, who had been a prosperous attorney, or her grandfather, who had been a fashionable solicitor, or even her father, a wealthy gentleman at large? Against the relics of this ancient civilization they were of less account than the insects crawling about the Roman brickwork. And her mother, who for so many years had come tumbling heedlessly down through this serene country like a gaudy butterfly blown along by a wind from the north, what right had she to assume a superior humanity merely because she had money and a complexion of her own?

Coral felt guilty in thus criticizing her parents, and she turned round to smile at them and shout, above the whirr of the car, an inquiry after their well-being. They both assured her by a gesture that they were content, and Coral felt entitled to look sideways at Abel. Abel! It was a good name for him, for that was just what he seemed, his eyes fixed upon the road before them like the eyes of a cat fixed upon a bird almost within its reach, his hands vibrating, quivering indeed, on the wheel, yet nevertheless giving an impression of granitic stability. No, they were not a bit like granite. That was a dull comparison. They were like steel screws, and Abel himself was metal all through. He was really a part of the car, or at any rate akin to it. Coral had sometimes watched him feeding the Sunbeam with oil before they started the day's journey, and at dusk she had seen how affectionately, almost amorously, he would attend to it before he dreamed of looking after himself. She had noticed in his countenance a scarcely human benignity, for it was positively the expression of a solemn animal

caring for its young. That was why he did not seem out of place in this ancient province of Rome, or at any rate not more out of place than the car itself. He was something new in humanity, a creature disdainful of the past which could have produced neither him nor the machinery of which he seemed an emanation.

"Would it interest you to read a book about this part of France?" she asked.

He flicked his eyes round to her for a moment and away from the road before him.

"Well, miss, it's very kind of you, but by the time I've seen to the car I'm more inclined for bed than reading."

"You don't feel that you want to know the history of all the wonderful old buildings we have looked at?"

This time he did not turn his eyes, for another car was coming toward them in an angry cloud of dust. He did smile, however.

"I don't know that I was ever much of a one for history, miss. I like to think about what's coming. I reckon life's a bit too full of has-beens."

The approaching car passed them with the sound of a sudden rent.

"Lancia," said Frank.

"Oh, a Lanchester?" Coral echoed vaguely.

"Lancia," he repeated. "Good gracious, miss, fancy thinking that was a Lanchester!"

Coral felt snubbed. Her acquaintance with the Roman remains in Provence was nothing to set off against such a blunder.

"I was never much of a one for machinery," she apologized.

"I never met a woman who was," said Frank. "It's beyond them, I reckon. Still, I don't know why I'm holding forth about women, for I was never much of a

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one for women, I wasn't. We're doing sixty kilometres," he added nonchalantly.

How many English chauffeurs leaving their native country for the first time would have left the miles behind them so easily?

"You've learnt to reckon in kilometres already," she commented.

He probably did not intend to be rude, but the intonation he threw into his "of course" was quite contemptuous.

"It's a pity we don't have the decimal measures in England," he declared.

"We're too conservative."

"Yes, that's our trouble," he agreed. "And there's only one thing as'll cure the world of that."

"And that is?"

"Speed! When a fellow in Camberwell can say to himself on a Saturday afternoon that he'll spend the week-end in Egypt; when a fellow can fly there himself—yes, strap a pair of wings on himself and fly from Camberwell to Egypt in six hours."

"Ah, when," Coral agreed with a smile.

"And perhaps the day isn't as far off as you think. Yes, that'll cure conservatism and war and tariffs and all the other rotten old has-beens that's keeping us back. These old ruins round here you want me to take an interest in don't hurt nobody. They're harmless really, even if they are has-beens. But the ruins of thought aren't harmless. And it's them we've got to clear out of the way. You think of what the push-bike did for women and poor people. Why, it set them free. And the push-bike wasn't much in the way of speed. You think what it'll mean when anybody can fly like a pigeon. Why, the whole world will be set free."

He spoke with the enthusiasm of a fanatic, and Coral

Southward

was so much absorbed by his prophecy that when she felt a touch upon her shoulder she was startled. She turned round to hear her father say :

“Tell Abel not to drive so fast. We must be doing sixty miles an hour.”

Coral conveyed her father's message, at which the new chauffeur raised his eyebrows. But he reduced the speed.

CHAPTER IX

NORTHWARD

CORAL spent a good deal of her time that autumn in the car. Her mother found the Riviera amusing enough, but not sufficiently amusing to agree to her husband's plan of taking Coral for a tour in Italy. Whenever he suggested that she could spare him, she protested that she knew no one, and as he did not want to have this tour turned into a grievance for the next twelve months, he gave way. He would have liked to take Coral round with him to all the interesting places in the neighbourhood; but even this displeased his wife, and as Avery wanted his daughter to enjoy herself, he took it upon himself to wait upon his wife and left Coral free to do as she liked.

"I'm not sure that Coral ought to be allowed to spend her whole time alone with Abel in the car," Mrs. Avery protested at last. "Besides, it's high time that she took the trouble to meet a few people. She might even begin to think about getting married."

"Nonsense," said the father. "She's only twenty-one. There's plenty of time for that calamity. This new chauffeur is a very decent young fellow, and I've taken a great fancy to him. You don't seriously suggest that there is any danger of Coral's falling in love with him?" he asked with a laugh.

"I should be sorry to suggest that anything was impossible to the young girl of to-day," his wife replied. "However, I admit that I should hardly suspect even Coral of such folly as that."

"Well, I feel much more at ease about her when she's in Abel's company than I should feel if she were driving about in a car with one of these foreign fortune-hunters that are the pest of the Riviera."

He surveyed the crowd of promenaders with disgust.

"I don't know why you have such a rooted objection to foreign titles, Maurice. Personally, I should rather like Coral to marry some charming young count. There's something so picturesque about Madame la Comtesse."

The husband stroked his moustache to hide the fact that his wife was setting his teeth on edge.

"As long as she marries a gentleman," he said, "I don't think that we need bother very much about his picturesqueness."

Next year, Avery promised himself, he would escape from England before his wife was ready, and then telegraph for Coral to join him in Venice, perhaps, or in Naples, or even in Tunis. He did not fancy that Constance would care very much about Tunis. The wife from whom he was plotting to escape for at least three months next year said that she must go down and dress for a tea-party. Avery told her that he would pick her up later, and sat idly in the sunshine watching the idle people walking round and round the bandstand like flies buzzing round a chandelier. Middle-age began to look like becoming a bore. He wished that women nowadays were not so intent on keeping young. Of course, it would not matter so much how young they kept if they could only grow out of being jealous. Constance was always complaining about the behaviour of the modern young woman, but neither she nor any of the other mothers of grown-up daughters seemed able to comprehend that they had forfeited the respect of the younger generation. There was, apart from æsthetics, no reason why a woman should not go on dancing till she was ninety, but in that case

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she ought not to grumble at the precocity of her great-granddaughters. If age stole from youth, youth would inevitably retort by stealing from age. But something would have to be done about marriage if wives were going to prolong their youth in this manner. Yes, next year he should escape with Coral, and not spend the autumn procuring entertainment for Constance, who really must learn to amuse herself without wanting him to watch her antics.

In December the Riviera visit came to an end, and Coral found herself driving northward in the Sunbeam, seated, as always throughout these last two months, beside Frank Abel. There were no swallows now in Provence; and the sloping vineyards of Burgundy were bare. It rained so hard all the way from Lyons to Paris that Coral found herself longing to leave her father and mother at some railway station and to tell Abel to turn the car southward again. Yes, she would willingly have driven with him down to the very toes of Italy or to the ultimate shores of Spain. And it would not have been merely to go in pursuit of the sun. She was definitely aware of a desire to run her hand along the sleeve of Abel's leather coat. Had she surrendered to this impulse, she would have done so in the spirit of a curious child that strokes, at first timorously, and then more boldly, a well-oiled rod of steel, until at last it ventures to explore more deeply the mechanism which is attracting it, and perhaps finally even dares to take the whole complicated machine to pieces. She smiled at a fancy that his mental processes were an arrangement of cog-wheels actually, and the thought of running the palm of her hand backward along their fine serrulations gave her a thrill whenever the asperity of his tongue testified to the aptness of her comparison.

The weather grew worse. They were being

stabbed by bayonets of cold rain, and there were moments when the wind blew with such rage across the level country that it seemed as if presently the earth must heave in billows like the sea. It was then that Coral hardly knew how to contend with her desire to lean against him and turn all that discomfort to an exquisite comfort. He really was admirable. She would turn her head and mark how serenely he drove and how his eyebrows were raised to express his contempt of the elements. He had often referred vaguely to his ambitions while he was driving her about the Riviera; but if ever she had displayed a sympathetic interest in his plans or shown herself anxious to know more about them, he had withdrawn within himself, had closed his works, as it were, with a snap, like a man who has been showing the inside of his watch to a child. Toward the close of the last day of that journey north Coral asked him point-blank what he intended to do in the immediate future about his invention.

"Go on saving money for a bit," he replied, so laconically that she felt discouraged.

Nevertheless she persisted, for she felt that now, if ever, he would be conscious of her deep interest in him and understand that it was not the complacent patronage of his employer's daughter. This evening they would be in Paris, and a day or two later in London. The sophistication of the city would blur their intercourse. Both of them would be affected by it. Both of them would be on the alert for criticism from outside.

"You wouldn't care for me to try to interest anybody in your invention? Or even . . ." she hesitated. "Or even, perhaps, let me find some of the money you want for tools and all that sort of thing. I've always heard that experiments cost so much."

"No, thank you, miss," he said quickly. "I've got

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along so far without help from outside, and I'd rather remain independent, if I can. If you let one of these capitalists into a good thing, you soon find yourself left out."

"But I'm not exactly a capitalist," Coral argued.

"No; but you belong to a different way of life to what I do," he said. "Besides, I wouldn't care to go into partnership with a woman."

She blushed hotly, fancying that in the manner of his rejection of her offer he wished to include a deliberate rejection of herself. She thought bitterly that it served her right. Naturally, a man like Abel would be incapable of appreciating the spirit in which she desired to help him. She should have known better than thus to invite his insolence.

"Paris in half an hour, miss," he said.

She hoped that the tone in which she acknowledged this piece of information would not give him an impression that she was piqued. However, he should soon learn by her manner that she had no intention of allowing the least familiarity now that their trip abroad was coming to an end.

CHAPTER X

A VISIT TO THE TEMPLE

FRANK was incapable of satisfying his aunt's curiosity about the people he was with. He became irritable when she pressed him to describe Mr. Avery or Mrs. Avery, and positively exasperated if she worried him to talk to her about Miss Avery.

"Good lord, auntie, I've got something better to do with my eyes than use them all the time for staring at people. The place suits me well enough, and I'm saving money. Isn't that enough?"

"Well, you could tell anyone if Mr. Avery was fair or dark without staring," she grumbled. "I believe you do it on purpose."

"Do what?"

"Be so close with me always. You didn't use to be so close with me. Never you didn't. You was always quite an open boy. I don't know what's come over you. For all I know about you nowadays I mightn't be here. You don't tell me anything about your invention except to say not to interrupt you because you're thinking of something. You can't always be thinking. Well, you can be glad I'm not all the time thinking, and sitting in my chair like a monument. You'd be the first to ask me what I was thinking about, that's a sure thing. And if you're not thinking, you're hammering. I'm sure I wonder sometimes what the people next door must say. Anyone would think that you kept a carpenter's shop in your bedroom. And if you're not hammering, you're

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boiling glue over my kitchen fire till the house smells like a hospital."

Frank, occupied with a pair of compasses and a rule, paid no attention to his aunt's tirade.

"Thinking about something," she exclaimed, returning to the remark which had provoked her outburst. "Thinking about somebody, more like!"

He looked up at her sharply with his dark glittering eyes.

"If you say any more, auntie, I shall pack up my box and go and live near the garage. You're enough to drive a fellow potty the way you carry on."

His aunt fell into a silent dismay, and for that night her curiosity was quenched.

The next morning, however, when Frank had left Dairymaids Row to go down to the garage, she did not wait to tidy the house as thoroughly as usual, but about ten o'clock put on her hat and coat and set out to the Temple. She must have been here before, because she found her way at once to Pump Court and climbed one of the dingy staircases with complete assurance. At the very top she opened a shiny black door and went boldly into the chambers of Mr. F. Castleton. The clerk recognized her with an expression as near to a smile as a barrister's clerk ever achieves.

"Good morning, Mr. Huntbath."

"Good morning, Miss Raeburn."

"Is Mr. Castleton busy?"

"I'll give him a knock, Miss Raeburn."

"Thanks ever so, Mr. Huntbath."

"Don't mention it, Miss Raeburn." Then the dried-up little clerk, who was scarcely any taller than May herself, came very close and, putting on an expression of what he supposed indicated a sense of mischief, chuckled. "It's really a pleasure to interrupt a man who works so

A Visit to the Temple

hard as Mr. Castleton. How he keeps his hair, Miss Raeburn, I'm sure I don't know. I said to him when I was in one of my mischievous humours the other day, 'Upon my word, Mr. Castleton,' I said, 'I don't know how you keep your hair on with that wig, and I don't know how you keep your wig on with that hair.' "

Then with a laugh that was rather like the crackling of a paper-bag, Mr. Huntbath went off to interrupt the barrister.

"Why, May," said the tall man, getting up from his desk to greet her, "this is a pleasure. It's quite two years since you last paid me a visit. You're looking worried. Nothing the matter, I hope?"

"It's about Frank."

"About young Frank, eh? What's he been doing now? And when am I to be allowed to meet him?"

"Oh, no, please, it's better he never saw you. I'd rather he didn't, Mr. Castleton."

"Well, that's as you like. But I hope he hasn't been getting into trouble."

"Oh, no, the boy's as good as he can be, but he's taken a place as chauffeur to some people called Avery."

The tall barrister gave an exclamation of astonishment.

"And what I wanted to ask you was if it was him."

"Maurice?"

Her affirmation was a whisper.

"I'll find out for you. He still calls himself Abel?"

"Oh, yes. I wouldn't have him find out his real name for anything."

"Where do these Averys live?"

"In Westminster. Little Queen Street."

"Good God, what fatality! That is where Maurice Avery lives."

"I felt in my bones it was the same. And the worst

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of it is, he likes the place. And he gets good money. Do you ever see him now?"

"Who, Maurice? Very, very rarely."

"I'll never get Frank to leave without I tell him why he oughtn't to be there," said May.

"But why tell him? Why should he leave?"

"Well, it don't seem right somehow he should be taking *his* money," said May. "I don't think *she'd* like it."

"Our little Jenny?"

May nodded, and wiped away the tears.

"Oh, I think Jenny would like most of all that her son got on in the world."

"Yes, that's where it is. He reckons he is getting on there. It's all this inventing. He wants the money."

"What is he inventing?"

"Oh, don't ask me. All I know is it must be something very messy. I'd as soon tidy up after an earthquake. And that reminds me I haven't put the house straight before I came out. So I think I'll be getting back."

"This is a very short visit, May, after an interval of two years."

"Well, it was more to ask you that question than to pay a visit. My visiting days is over. So you don't think I ought to get him away from this place somehow or other?"

"Not unless you intend to tell him the history," said Castleton gravely. "It wouldn't be fair to the boy to manœuvre him out of what he considers a good job. And as you've managed until now to keep his history from him, and even his name, I don't think it would do any good to give him the shock of hearing it now. Fate has played a queer trick, but I don't see that any harm is likely to come from it."

May did not feel at all satisfied by the advice her old

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friend had given her. She was inclined to think, as she slowly descended the old staircase, that Castleton by his preoccupation with legal matters and by living tucked away in this dusty old corner of London had lost the ability to see things in their proper light.

"He looks at it one way," she thought, "but Jenny and me look at it another. Still, I won't do nothing right off. I'll just wait a bit. Anyway, now I know it is him I won't want to worry Frank whether his Mr. Avery's got blue eyes or any other colour."

CHAPTER XI

THE TALISMAN

WHEN Coral was back in London she decided that it was perfectly easy to put out of her mind for ever the ridiculous idea of being interested in a chauffeur. She now looked back with dismay at her undignified behaviour in France; indeed, she was so deeply shocked by it that for the first week or so she could hardly bring herself to acknowledge Abel's salute when she entered the car. Soon, however, she began to tell herself that what she had imagined to be a deliberate rebuff had really been an expression of the young man's complete unconsciousness of the possibility that his employer's daughter might be attracted to him. There was certainly not the least trace of insolence in his demeanour, and if he had for a moment supposed that she were in—no, interested—well, perhaps it would be more honest to say in love—he would scarcely have been able to avoid the suggestion that he was aware of it. A man in his position would not have the tact to convey unconsciousness unless he really were unconscious. It would be a pity to deny herself the convenience of being driven to dances by Abel, merely because she had allowed herself to be too expansive. In fact, his attitude throughout the Riviera trip was in one way a guarantee of his suitableness to drive her about to London parties. She felt completely cured of her passing folly, attributed it to being bored on the Continent, and took to smiling sweetly at Abel once more whenever she had occasion to acknowledge his salute.

Toward the end of January Coral met a young man

The Talisman

whose dancing exactly suited her own. She had already met several young men with this qualification, but in every case the sympathy had ended with the music. With Cecil Denham she began to fancy that she had more in common than the mere ease of their dancing. This young man talked confidently of his political career, and Coral's grave blue eyes looked graver and bluer when she sat and listened to his relentless demolition of the leading politicians of the day. Perhaps if Cecil Denham had asked her to help his career by marrying him she might have offered to do her best. But he did not ask her to do anything except dance with him nearly every night at a dancing club in the lofts of a Mayfair stable—an exclusive and dimly lighted club called the Talisman, which was hung with black and gold and suffused with a kind of sombre Byzantine splendour. Here several nights a week, till two or three o'clock in the morning, Coral used to dance with Cecil Denham, and when not dancing with him would pay grave attention to his plans for the reconstruction of the British Empire. Unless the late hours were to be considered bad, it was a harmless enough way of spending her time; so when her mother attacked her on the eternal subject of the behaviour of modern young women, Coral was extremely indignant and could not understand why objection should be taken to her interest in politics.

"My dear child," Mrs. Avery retorted, "although no doubt to you I must be appearing hopelessly antique, I am still near enough to my youth to be perfectly well aware that no girl takes an interest in politics. Of course, I readily admit that she might take an interest in a politician. I say 'politician' out of kindness to this Mr. Denham, for really, Coral, I think that to give him the title is being more than kind."

"He has been asked to contest a Glasgow constituency

Coral

for the Conservatives at the next election," Coral announced.

Mrs. Avery laughed.

"With a Communist majority of nearly five figures," she mocked. "Come, come, at that rate he'll soon be in the Cabinet."

The only effect of her mother's ridicule was to make Coral imagine that Cecil Denham was much more interesting than she had supposed; and she replied to criticism by going five times a week to dance at the Talisman Club, the frequenters of which began to ask each other what was the relation between this tall, wide-eyed young woman and her partner. Not even the deliberately perverted illumination of ebony and amber could corrupt or tarnish Coral's simple beauty, a beauty that was so simple as almost to appear stern. Indeed the observer who watched her rise from one of the supper tables in the gilded alcoves and walk gravely to the dancing-floor might be forgiven for staring at her and evidently speculating upon her presence in such an inappropriate environment. If that observer had possessed a taste for sculpture and some acquaintance with the classics he would have recognized in Coral the perfect model for a young Juno, such a Juno as might have made a delightful companion for Diana, not the matronly Juno of convention, all ample curves and jealousy. Her eyes, under eyebrows far apart, were calm and blue as the Mediterranean on a summer morning; her lips, close set, gave a touch of austerity to a mouth that might otherwise have seemed almost too full and flower-like; a cleft chin firm and shapely, a straight nose, a wide forehead, cheeks like carnations, a weight of light brown hair. . . . But no mere catalogue of features could reproduce that peculiar dignity of hers; that sureness of poise for which majestic seemed too heavy an epithet. And it was not only this tranquil

The Talisman

and majestic beauty which made the observer speculate upon her presence here. It was the divine aloofness of her and, if the words may still be used, her candour and her purity that troubled his worldly standards.

"You're looking wonderful to-night, Coral."

"Am I?" she replied indifferently. "Look out, Cecil, you're bending your knees."

Cecil Denham eyed her as he might have eyed a filly about whose temper he had some misgivings.

"Wonderful," he repeated in the dry voice of detached appraisement.

"I'm feeling jolly fit," she said. "I went round in two under bogey to-day."

He nodded absently.

"Coral, have you ever thought about the man you'd like to marry?"

It was characteristic of her that she should take his question literally and answer it simply without the least attempt to involve it in a secondary significance.

"If you mean 'have I ever thought about any particular man that I would like to marry,' I shan't tell you. But if you mean 'have I got an ideal husband in my mind,' I can tell you 'No.'"

"Coral, sometimes you give me the impression of being absolutely cold-blooded."

"I'm not at all cold-blooded," she replied.

He hesitated a moment.

"Why not . . ." He broke off abruptly. There was something in the unabashed way in which she gazed directly into his eyes (she was as tall as himself) that made him pause. At that moment in the dance they drew near to the band, and the drum-taps, while they were passing down that space of floor within, as it were, the magic circle of the music, dispelled all his scruples.

"I ought to get back to my flat by half-past eleven,"

Coral

he said, "so that I can catch the post with the corrected proof of an article. I'd like you to glance through it, Coral. I suppose you wouldn't drive me back after this dance and"—this time his hesitation was not longer than the drawing of a breath—"come in and read it? I'd like your opinion about something I say. You know, whether you think it's wise."

"We'll go after this dance," Coral agreed. "Come on, we'll go now. This is a rotten tune."

"Is it?" said Cecil Denham. "I thought it was rather a good one."

CHAPTER XII

JEALOUSY

CORAL had been right in supposing that Frank had been completely unconscious of attracting her more than a chauffeur ought to be able to attract the daughter of his employer. But she in her turn had not been any more perspicacious, because she had been equally unconscious of attracting him. He, however, when he suffered from her coldness after what she had fancied was his intention to snub her on the way home from the South, had supposed that she had divined his feelings and wished to put him in his place.

"She needn't worry," he had thought bitterly. "She can't be a bit more anxious to snap her fingers at me than what I am to do the same to her."

With this resolution in his mind he had applied himself to the great invention with all the enthusiasm he could evoke. Unfortunately, either as luck would have it or because thoughts of Coral would wander round his mind, he made no progress at all that winter. Adjustments and arrangements that had seemed so very simple when he had first thought of them turned out in practice to be impossibly complicated. He lacked even the incentive of winning Coral by his success, for he never imagined that however great his success might be it would make the least difference to his position where she was concerned.

May noticed his depression and asked him what was the matter.

"Things haven't worked out quite as I expected," he told her. "But, for goodness' sake, don't you start in

Coral

fussing, auntie. They *will* work out all right. It's just that I'm stuck for the moment. I'll get on with it presently."

"Do you like the people you're with?"

"Yes, yes, they're all right."

Then she would pester him with questions about the whole family, questions which he vowed were enough to make a fellow potty.

"How do I know if Mr. Avery's got any grey hairs? Anybody would think I was a blooming barber to hear you talk. Or a chauffeur-valet," he added in a tone of utter contempt for such an amphibian monstrosity.

When Coral took to frequenting the Talisman Club and coming away from it every evening with the same over-dressed, glass-eyed, tin-ribbed rasher of wind, Frank scarcely knew how to stop himself from driving the car into the first lamp-post that gleamed balefully before them in the raw night air. To sit waiting in the car while Coral danced away the hours inside was a torment of jealousy, not that he ever admitted to himself that he was jealous. His black emotions were all ascribed to being kept out at night. But when the rasher of wind was deposited on the doorstep of his flat in Curzon Street (luckily it was not far from the Talisman), Frank thoroughly enjoyed driving Coral back to Westminster. His resentment at being kept out late vanished with the disappearance of the rasher of wind.

On the night in mid-March when Cecil Denham invited Coral to visit his flat and read through the article, Frank wondered as they drove along behind him to Curzon Street if there had been a quarrel, so early were they leaving; and he decided that there had been a quarrel, and experienced a glorious elation of spirit in consequence. But when Coral alighted with her escort and told him to wait, Frank was on the verge of leaping out of the

car and with outstretched arms barring the entrance of the flats to her.

"Wait for you here, miss?" he repeated.

"Here."

He could not help himself.

"But how long are you going to be? Of course, I don't mind waiting," he added, with an attempt to disguise the rage that was tearing him. "The only thing is that Mr. Avery has ordered the car early—well, eight o'clock, as a matter of fact—to take him down to Merryfield."

She paused a moment, as if to examine the worth of his objections.

"I shan't be more than half an hour," she said, and with that she crossed the pavement to where Cecil Denham was waiting for her on the steps of the flats. A moment later she had passed within.

Frank settled back in his seat and stared up at the murky sky. A rift in the clouds revealed a cluster of dim stars.

"If I could fly there!" he thought gloomily. "And never come back!" he continued. "Yes, when I've argued a fellow out that you would be able to fly to the moon, and they've asked me how I meant to come back, I've been fixed for an answer. But the answer's all right. Who wants to come back?"

The clouds met, and the dim stars were once more obscured. Frank tossed his head in disgust.

"That's right," he said aloud. "Cover up the only blooming thing that's worth looking at!"

A policeman passing by on his beat showed an inclination to stop and have a chat, but Frank's monosyllabic replies discouraged him; and he went on his way, turning his lantern occasionally on the doors and basements of Curzon Street.

Coral

The black half-hour dragged by, and Frank sat up in the expectation of seeing Coral come down the steps and cross the pavement to the car. But there was no sign of life in the tall building, the grim deadness of which was accentuated by the empty golden entrance and the view of the empty immotionable lift that seemed as desolate as a frozen ship.

Another quarter of an hour went by.

Frank jumped out of the car and stalked defiantly into the hall of the flats. There was a great marble clock on a bracket, but even that had stopped. He went to the foot of the winding staircase and listened for voices. The silence was absolute. Presently his eye caught the gilded names on the address board of the various occupants. Beside *Mr. Cecil Denham* on the fifth floor a projecting tongue of wood declared that he was out.

"Out?" Frank muttered. "What's that mean?"

It did not strike him that the claim was merely a piece of neglect on the part of somebody. He felt convinced that the tongue of wood had been deliberately set to enunciate a lie.

"Wants to make everybody think he's out, does he?" Frank went on. "I wouldn't trust that glass-eye no farther than where I'm standing."

He went back to the car and sounded the horn three times.

"All right," he threatened when there was no response, "three more toots and I'm going up to knock. She don't think I've got to have the car cleaned by eight o'clock to-morrow morning, and an eighty-mile drive on top of it!"

He sounded the horn again.

"Half an hour, she said, and it's nearly an hour. I'm going up."

He looked round to see if the policeman was in sight

so that he could commend the car to his vigilance, but the policeman had turned the corner. Frank locked the ignition, and resolutely invaded the flats. He had reached the fourth floor when on the landing above he heard Coral's voice.

"Let go of my arm, please. Let go! Oh, if I'd known that you were such a cad!"

If Frank had noted down at the time how he reached the floor above it might have given him a useful hint for his invention, for he reached the fifth floor in a flash, it seemed.

"What's all this?" he demanded of Cecil Denham, who had been trying to prevent Coral's departure, but who, on seeing the chauffeur, at once let go of her arm and drew back a step.

"Are you speaking to me?" he demanded, putting up his monocle to crush this curious impertinent.

"No, I'm not wasting any time in speaking to you," Frank retorted. "Only if I was you I'd drop that bit of glass out of your eye, because if I hit you as hard as I reckon I am going to hit you, you might really want a glass eye when I've finished with you."

"Look here, Coral, this fellow's drunk," Denham said. "You'd better come inside and I'll telephone round to the police-station."

But Coral was already hurrying down the stairs.

In that moment Frank made the greatest sacrifice of his life, for he followed her without obtaining from Mr. Denham his revenge for the many hours this winter he had waited on his account outside the Talisman Club.

CHAPTER XIII

THE DARK-FLOWING RIVER

CORAL had reached the street when Frank overtook her.

"My goodness, miss, you did go fast down those stairs," he said. "And you're all trembling," he whispered. So was Frank himself, for in his agitation he had forgotten the gulf between them and had taken the hand of his young mistress.

"I'll drive back beside you," Coral said, nor did she withdraw her arm from his clasp when he led her tenderly across the pavement to the car.

"What's the time?" she asked. "You want to be home early, don't you? I'd have liked to drive right along the Embankment. I've got a headache."

"We can drive anywhere you like," Frank declared enthusiastically. "I only sounded that horn because you said you wouldn't be more than half an hour. Well, I thought it was a bit funny you going back with him to his place."

"It was very silly of me," Coral said. "Very silly," she murmured as she snuggled down out of the wind.

Frank did not comment on her self-criticism. He did not feel capable of doing so adequately, and he was in dread lest anything he might say should break the spell that seemed to be weaving itself about them on this raw night of March.

They drove in silence down Piccadilly, in silence down St. James's, in silence along Pall Mall and Cockspur Street and Whitehall, for this was the conventional way home to Westminster, and it seemed to impose upon their

The Dark-Flowing River

spirits the relation in which each stood to the other. This was no more than one of many drives home after the Talisman Club, except that Coral was now sitting beside the chauffeur. But presently, when they ran into the shadow of the Houses of Parliament, Frank turned and asked her abruptly if she really wanted to drive along the Embankment.

Coral nodded without speaking, and the car shot past that turning to the right which would have taken them back to convention. A moment later they were in Grosvenor Road. A nipping easterly wind was blowing across the river from Lambeth; but Coral's left cheek was all on fire, and she did not feel its bitter frigidity. The towers of Lambeth Palace stood out dark below the watery light of the late-rising moon; here and there in the mass of St. Thomas's Hospital lighted windows showed very yellow against the silvery grimness and dimness of the misty sky. White crocuses looked like pieces of paper on the black grass of the Embankment Gardens. The tide was running out, and the weed on the muddy foreshore gave a proper marine tang to the air. They reached Vauxhall Bridge, paused while an empty golden tram roared past, leapt forward past the gaunt squares and sinister façades of Pimlico, pierced the vaporous cavern made by the bridge of Grosvenor Road Station, and saw before them the straight length of Chelsea Reach with Battersea Park embowered across the river, and ahead the round lamps of the Embankment like a hundred moons. Warm and rotund were those little earthy moons, if you regarded them in one humour, but indifferent, cold, and globular if your humour was otherwise.

Just by Chelsea Bridge Coral told Frank to stop, for it was suddenly seeming to her that the long, straight reach of the river, with the trees on the further bank, and

Coral

the quaint decorous houses on this side, and the water ribbed with the reflections of all those mercilessly unwinking lamps, was the vista of her destiny. She was thinking that when she told her driver to drive on it would be the offer of herself, since if once they should enter that straightness he and she must inevitably converge upon each other within that straightness.

"If now I tell him to turn and drive home I shall never again be so near to him," she thought in these actual words, "and if I tell him to drive on I shall have to touch his hand that is lying there limp upon the wheel, and if I touch his hand I shall touch his heart, and he will take me to him for ever . . . for ever and ever."

Coral remained in the suspended animation of indecision for awhile. Then she became aware that there was a coffee-stall close to where they were waiting, and that leaning against the counter of it were groups of people laughing and talking. And it struck her that all the rest of humanity was as unimportant to her now as the people by that coffee-stall, that the whole world would be no more able to intrude upon herself and the man beside her than the presence of that coffee-stall was able to disturb them at this moment. She moved her hand to bid him drive on. Then she pulled it back on an impulse of doubt, for the words of an old Scots song came to her from some concert last year, or two years ago :

Touch not the nettle lest haply it sting ye.

Waly sae green as the bracken grows ;

Love not the love that never can win ye,

For the bonds of love are ill to loose.

"But he *can* win me if I will be won," she whispered to herself, and putting out her hand she touched his and bade him drive on.

The Dark-Flowing River

He did not turn and look at her; he did not even acknowledge her command; but he drove the car forward at full speed, so that all the straight length of the Embankment was raked up by the car in one instant, and between Chelsea Bridge and Albert Bridge there seemed nothing more than a handful of grey dust.

"Why are you driving so fast?" Coral asked.

"So that you might put out your hand and touch me again," he told her.

For the fraction of a second he took his eyes from the road before him and gave them to her.

"How could I ever have hesitated for a moment?" she asked herself.

They passed Battersea Bridge and came to a stop at the Cremorne Arms.

"Here's the end of the Embankment," he said.

But she felt that he meant to say: "Here is the beginning of our life."

She looked beyond where the great Electric Power Station pulsed in the aqueous and silvery gloom, rising like a mighty cliff above the mean little houses at its base. And this man beside her, what was he but the product of some such mighty gathering-up of energy? She could not let him sit here longer in uncertainty beside her.

"How did you know I loved you?"

"How did you know it about me?" he parried.

"Come," she said, and she took him as sometimes in fables a goddess has taken a mortal. "Come and stare over the parapet at the river."

He let himself be guided by her; but though he moved beside her as easily and gracefully as the dark faun he so much resembled, his mind was a surge of confusion within, and he could not bring himself to take the lead and assume the dominion over her that she was offering. Had Coral been more self-conscious she would have

Coral

fancied herself to be behaving ridiculously; but even as her purpose was straight like that long, straight reach between the bridges, so her demeanour was tranquil like the wooded mass of Battersea Park on this night of earliest spring.

They stood for a while entranced by the sense of their separation from time and space. Then Frank, looking deep into her candid eyes, seeing that her lips were faintly parted, and beholding them open like the petals of a rose to the sun, knowing that she had forgotten all about him, except that he was hers, forgot about himself and folded her close, and closer, and so close that he asked in a voice small and far away as a voice at the bottom of a well if he was hurting her. She shook her head, and with the gesture her lips swept his like the wings of butterflies.

"I am so light, my darling, when you hold me that you could not hurt me. Have you ever seen two bits of thistledown blown along together high out of sight? We are as light as thistledown, and we have blown together, and we shall blow on and on together through life, and—ah. . . ."

"Then I am hurting you," he said.

"No, it wasn't that. I was thinking that one of us would die before the other."

"Well, don't think things like that," he commanded. "There's quite enough unpleasant things to think which we'll have to think about."

He was waking from his dream and wondering what was going to be the outcome of this enchanted night.

CHAPTER XIV

CORAL TALKS TO HERSELF

WHEN Coral was alone in her bedroom, she sat down before the mirror of her dressing-table and asked herself if she realized what she had done.

"Perfectly," she replied to herself. "I realize perfectly."

"But a chauffeur!"

"I love him."

"Your own father's chauffeur?"

"I love him."

"And what's going to happen now?"

"I shall be engaged to him."

"But there'll be a most terrific row."

"Rows have no importance if you're as much in love as I am."

"That's all very well. But do you intend to marry him?"

"Of course."

"And is he to remain your father's chauffeur?"

"No, I shall explain to father about his invention."

"Frank won't like being patronized."

"He won't be patronized."

"You did behave foolishly. Suppose he had not loved you? Think what a position you would have put yourself into."

"But I knew in all my being that he did love me. Unless I did something to encourage him we should have remained apart for ever. Anyway, there really isn't anything to argue about. I love him! I love him!"

Coral

Coral undressed quickly and switched off the light, so that in the darkness she could rest once more in his arms as she had rested an hour ago beside the river. She tormented herself by re-living the early part of the night, by dancing in the amber and ebony shades of the Talisman Club and allowing Cecil Denham to flatter her with praises of her political intelligence.

"What a fool I was!" she ejaculated.

She heard Cecil Denham's dry, crackling voice over her shoulder while she sat in the arm-chair reading his article.

"A girl like you, Coral, could *make* a man if only you'd not look at life from a conventional standpoint. It isn't that I wouldn't like to marry you. Heaven knows there's nobody I would sooner marry, but marriage does tie a man up at the beginning of his career. But let me really make a name, and then we can be married. Why waste all these jolly years of our youth? Kiss me, Coral. I adore you . . ."

And then she had rolled up the typescript and struck him across the mouth as hard as she could, and turned to leave his flat. But he had held her arm and dared to assume that she was acting the rage she felt.

"What's all this mean?"

How wonderful it had been to see Frank come springing up the stairs like a dark and angry cat. Yes, he was like a cat with his small white teeth and very crimson lips and slanting, fierce, unclouded eyes. Cecil Denham had backed away from him just as a cowardly white dog backs away from a cat.

"And now he's mine," Coral whispered to the darkness. "And I have to make *him*. Make Cecil Denham! I'd sooner spend my life cutting out profiles in cardboard. But to make *him*. Now that *will* be worth doing."

CHAPTER XV

FRANK TALKS TO HIMSELF

FRANK did not feel anything like the elation of Coral when he found himself in the little bedroom above the garage. Indeed, he felt thoroughly dejected by the future. It was not that he did not love her or that he did not understand how much she loved him, but that the whole situation was an anomaly. There seemed only one thing for him to do, which was to give notice to-morrow when he drove her father down to Merryfield, and then emigrate. He ought to have given notice as soon as he knew that Coral was occupying his thoughts to the disadvantage of his own work. He ought not to have hung on like this, playing with fire all the while.

"Only the trouble was I never really allowed I *was* thinking about her," he reminded himself. "That's where anyone can go perfectly wrong. By blinking at things. If I'd seen a man going to hit me I'd have hit first, wouldn't I? And when I saw she was going to hit me, as anyone might say, I ought to have run for it, as I wasn't going to hit her back."

Then out of the frore London night the vision of Coral entered his little room. He flung himself head downward on the bed to shut out her face and form from his imagination.

"Leave me alone," he cried aloud. "You know as well as I do you can never be my girl."

"Why not?" the vision whispered. "You're mine. Out of all the world I've chosen you. Why can't you take me?"

Coral

Frank groaned.

"Take me, take me," the vision whispered again. "I am yours, yours only. What does anything matter except that? When you held me to your heart down there in the mist by the dark river you did not fear to call me your own."

He leapt from his bed and stood upright in the middle of the room to confront this haunting shape.

"And so you were. And so you are. And so you shall be," he cried in exaltation.

But in the grey light of the morning when he was getting ready the car to drive Mr. Avery down to Merryfield, despair of the future fell upon Frank again.

CHAPTER XVI

FATHER AND DAUGHTER

MAURICE AVERY had been intending to buy a place in the country ever since he had sold his father's house near Godalming. At last he had found the home for which he had been searching three years, a square, grey house surrounded by groves of beeches and holm-oaks in a fold of the Wiltshire Downs, an austere and ancient house three miles from the nearest hamlet. The beechen groves were like an island amid the rolling billows of turf, and the house rode in this haven as remote and self-contained as a ship. Mrs. Avery could not understand why her husband should choose a place so completely off the map.

"And why it should be called Merryfield I simply cannot imagine," she protested, "for of all the gloomy places it's the very gloomiest I ever saw. What are we going to do there? Yes, to be sure the tennis-courts are excellent, but we could have found excellent tennis-courts more within reach of young people to play on them. I don't want to accuse you of selfishness, Maurice, but I do think you ought to remember that you have a daughter who might want to meet somebody occasionally, not to mention a son."

Presently, however, Mrs. Avery discovered that the big landowner of the neighbourhood was an unmarried baronet of not much over thirty, which reconciled her somewhat to Merryfield, because it was only natural to suppose that a young unmarried baronet in such a district would be more than likely to fall in love with Coral. Yes,

Coral

the propinquity of Sir Giles Amersham would mitigate slightly the solitude.

Yet in spite of Sir Giles Amersham Mrs. Avery could not bring herself to take much interest in the arrangements and decorations of Merryfield, which was a relief to her husband who thoroughly enjoyed himself that spring in preparing the house.

"It's my toy," he announced. "If any of you like to come down and play with it, you're welcome to do so; but remember, it's my toy."

When at eight o'clock Frank brought the car round, Maurice came out at once and took the seat beside him. Frank did not like this, because it would mean that Mr. Avery would talk to him all the way down, and after last night he did not feel that he wanted to be talked to by her father.

Then just as they were starting one of the maids came running down the corridor to say that Miss Coral would be out in one minute.

Frank wondered if he had turned pale or blushed deepest crimson.

"Miss Coral?" her father repeated in astonishment.

"Yes, sir, Miss Coral said she was going to accompany you down to Wiltshire."

"The deuce she is!" Maurice exclaimed. "Why, my dear child," he went on as Coral confirmed the herald's announcement by appearing herself, "have you been up all night that you are dressed by eight o'clock of this bleak March morning?"

Coral glanced at Frank. It was a glance as vivid as a sudden sight of the sea from the train, a glance, however, that embarrassed the one for whom it was flashed, so that he stared in front of him with the most rigid attention to his professional demeanour, disclaiming all consciousness of it. Avery was less delighted by the

Father and Daughter

prospect of his daughter's company than he might have been. He had made up his mind to have a talk with his chauffeur and try to solve the problem of where he had met or seen him before, for all these months this had been puzzling him every time he spoke to the young man. Moreover, it was not merely a question of having seen him somewhere before; it was a desire to probe the cause of the strange attraction he felt to him, the kind of attraction that made people chatter about reincarnation in order to explain it. However, he left the seat he had taken in front of the car and prepared to be pleasantly conversational on the way down.

Coral did not encourage him. She was no sooner in the car than she fell into a complete silence, watching in a trance the back of Frank's head.

"My dear girl," Avery exclaimed petulantly at last, "if you didn't intend to say a word all the way, why did you come with me?"

Coral suddenly made up her mind to bring the affair to a climax by telling her father all about it. He would have to be told some time soon, and why not now when Frank was driving so beautifully along the Bath road?

"I haven't been talking, my dear," she told him, "because I've been thinking over what I want to tell you."

"Ah, then I know what it is," her father said with an attempt at lightness. "So the right man has come along already, has he?"

"My dear, how *did* you guess it?" Coral exclaimed in genuine astonishment.

"It's not very difficult. When your son takes you aside and says he has something to tell you, you know it is a question of money. When your daughter does the same thing, you know it is a question of matrimony."

Coral

"Why shouldn't it be just as much a question of money for the daughter?" Coral asked.

"Because women have no sense of shame about money. They ask for it brazenly."

He was trying to carry off a situation which was paining him considerably, for in his daughter he had found so much to compensate him for his wife.

"Well, my dear, you have guessed my secret," Coral admitted. "The right man has come along. I knew last night. At least, of course I knew last autumn really, but I tried to pretend that I didn't. And, father, you do like him, don't you?"

"Well, if the happy man is the political young gentleman with the eyeglass who talked to me so ardently about—well, really I forget what he did talk about, but I know that his ardour impressed me, even though I found the fuel it was consuming rather smoky. But then, I've always found politics extremely tedious. And so you've decided to be the wife of a Cabinet Minister? Personally, I'd almost sooner be the wife of a Wesleyan minister, but the choice is yours, dear child, not mine."

"Father, you don't really imagine I want to marry Cecil Denham? Why, I think he's perfectly loathsome. No, I'm going to marry *him*."

"Him?" her father repeated in bewilderment.

She was pointing to Frank, but the gesture said nothing to him, so far was his mind from even the faintest idea of such a juxtaposition.

"Hush, don't speak too loud," she said. "Because he doesn't know I'm telling you about us, and he's still your chauffeur, and it wouldn't be fair to smash up the car just because he's going to marry your daughter."

"Really, Coral, though I usually find your jokes amusing enough, this strikes me as rather a silly one."

Father and Daughter

"But it isn't a joke," she said. "I'm in earnest. I'm going to marry Frank Abel, your chauffeur."

Avery stared at his daughter and realized abruptly that she was in earnest. He gasped.

"This is madness, Coral. If you've been behaving foolishly with him, if you've made yourself cheap, the matter must be arranged in some other way. But marriage! Why, it's out of the question."

"But, father, you yourself have often said how much you liked him."

"I dare say I have, but not as a son-in-law. No, no, Coral, the thing is ridiculous. I decline even to argue about it. It's outside the consideration of sane human beings. If he wasn't driving the car I'd ask him what the deuce he meant by supposing that he could even discuss marriage with you."

"Well, as a matter of fact, he never did suppose he could. It was I who gingered him up to that."

Her father bowed ironically.

"Oh, you gingered him up? Delightful expression! I suppose you'll be telling me next that you're absolutely potty on him."

"You're a bit of a disappointment, father," she told him. "I thought we were good friends. I thought you'd understand. But I might be talking to mother, the way you've taken it."

But Avery was too angry to care if their friendship was shattered for ever. The sight of her sitting there so grave and calm and lovely infuriated him. If she had shown the least sign of grasping the enormity of what she was proposing to do; but she was talking about marriage with a chauffeur as if it were a tennis match she was arranging. A few tears, even a blush of embarrassment, and he might have been able to reason with her gently, might have explained the impossibility of the whole busi-

Coral

ness from the point of view of the world. Yes, if she had evinced the slightest regard for his feelings he might have gone so far as to tell her the history of his own rejection of love for the sake of the realities. Even in his rage he could not resist raking within his mind for the sort of speech that was popular in late Victorian drama, and framing the sentences to himself.

"I loved a girl once, Coral. She was a ballet dancer. But I knew that she would never be happy married out of her own surroundings. And so I gave her up."

And then for an instant the memory of what a fool he had been swamped self-pity in a wave of real despair. But he soon recovered himself and exclaimed aloud, unconscious that the sequence of his thought had not been revealed.

"But it's altogether different for a woman to marry beneath her."

"That's my risk," Coral said.

"No doubt," her father replied. "But you don't yet know enough of the world to be allowed to take it."

Coral's eye glittered like the blue of a glacier's heart.

"Allowed?" she echoed coldly.

And each fell into a silence of anger, while Frank, unconscious of what had been precipitated behind his back, drove the car straight and fast along the wide road to the West.

CHAPTER XVII

THE TOP OF THE WORLD

THE silence lasted until Trowbury, the nearest market town lying at the foot of the downs, had been left behind and the car was climbing the long diagonal slope that led to Merryfield. It was broken by Avery's turning to his daughter and saying :

"I don't want to speak to Abel on this subject until I have settled all my business at the house. May I ask you to say nothing to him either for the moment? I should prefer to express my opinion without the handicap of knowing that you had discussed between you the attitude to be adopted towards an unreasonable and hard-hearted father."

Coral hesitated a moment before replying.

"Suppose he asks me if I've said anything to you? I really don't think that I can tell him a lie."

"Well, if he asks you, you can tell him that you have, that I disapproved utterly of the state of affairs, that I intend to speak to him on the way home to-night, and that meanwhile you have promised not to discuss the matter. If you think you can't make such a promise, I suggest that you don't give him an opportunity of asking you anything. I mean I'd rather you took an interest in the decorations of the house," he added lamely.

"Oh, father, what a roundabout way you're going just to tell me that you don't want me to spend the rest of the morning with Frank," Coral exclaimed with a smile.

Coral

"You find the conditions too arduous?" he said, smiling himself, partly in answer to her smile, partly because he was beginning to tell himself that the whole business was so fundamentally ridiculous that he might even be wise to let it burn itself out like a fire that lacks substance rather than try to choke it with the damp fuel of opposition, which might ultimately prolong its life by giving it the wherewithal to sustain it.

"Well, I'll try not to warn him of the paternal wrath," Coral volunteered at last. And just then the car, passing between the mossy pillars of an old gateway, entered an undulating drive, over which it travelled for a few hundred yards through a grassy park-land until it came to a stop before the square stone house that was Merryfield.

Avery looked round when his daughter showed no sign of following him indoors; but he did not want to prejudice the effect on his chauffeur of his anger by telling her to come and being refused. The young man might suppose that he lacked authority. At the same time he felt that he was displaying some weakness, and the game of the particular shade of cream he wanted for most of the inside painting went all in favour of the decorator, whose conception of cream was a gelid blue-white that would have shocked the conscience even of a London milkman.

Meanwhile, Coral bade Frank come with her through the beechen groves and climb with her to the summit of the downs behind the house. At last they stood together on a dome of turf watching where the white scuts of innumerable rabbits twinkled in the pale March sunlight, and where the mad Jack hares at their gambols went lolloping down the green slopes below them.

"And it all belongs to you and me, my lover," she said, turning to him in a radiance of joy. "Why, Frank, what an extraordinary thing!"

The Top of the World

"What's an extraordinary thing?" he murmured, lost anew in that bewilderment into which the possession of this girl had plunged him, but feeling more at ease up here, where he seemed on the verge of his own airy element, than he had felt last night by that dark-flowing river.

"Your eyes are really deep blue, deep as sapphires, and I've been thinking all this time that they were brown. It shows that I never really dared to look at you properly until this moment."

"Well, lots of people have passed that remark," Frank said. "My aunt always says they're like what my mother's eyes were. She reckons there's streaks of green in them sometimes."

"Yes, there are," Coral agreed. "The kind of deep green lights you see in rock pools. Oh, Frank, it's such fun to be really interested in the colour of somebody's eyes."

"Yours are blue enough," he said. "No mistake about them. Why, they're as blue as blue glass."

And she, being madly in love, thought that the simile was perfect.

"Frank, when did you first begin to think that you loved me?"

"I didn't think about it at all. I knew I'd never met anybody like you the first time I saw you, and nearly ran into you, when I was coming away that first afternoon I went to see your father."

His eyes reflected a sudden cloud that passed across his mind.

"I knew the first time I sat beside you in the car," she whispered.

"Yes, but what's going to happen about it?" he asked gloomily. "What's your father going to say to me? You don't really suppose that he'll listen to the idea of

Coral

me being engaged to *you*? Of course he won't. Not for a minute he won't. He'll tell me to pack up and clear off out of it. And then a few weeks will go by, and you'll begin to think you were silly, and that'll be the end of it. Only if you think that," he added fiercely, "you needn't go wishing you hadn't been silly and thinking I'll trouble you. I was never much of a one for loving girls, but you can think I loved you, and you needn't ever be ashamed of it, because I won't be hanging around to remind you of it. I'll be out of this country altogether. But I won't ever wish I never set eyes on you, because I'm glad I did. Whatever comes of it, don't forget, I'm glad I did."

Coral listened to him in a rapture. He had scarcely said so much in all the time she had known him, and now she was thinking how eloquent he really was.

"Of course, father is going to be annoyed. So is mother. But does that matter, my dear? You're not going to marry me for my money. You're going to marry me because we love each other."

"Yes, but I can't help knowing that we're running a big risk," he replied. "It sounds all right before you do it, but the kind of life I can give you will be very different to anything you've ever imagined. I can't afford to give you servants and the sort of clothes you're used to. In fact, I've no business to be talking about marriage to you. That's what Mr. Avery will say to me, and I shan't have a word to answer him."

"Frank, do you want me to be really angry with you?" she demanded.

"I'd sooner you were angry with me now than went and put your head into a noose and wanted to wriggle out of it afterwards."

"I shall never want to wriggle out," she assured him. "Frank, this is our first walk together since we were

The Top of the World

engaged. Don't spoil it by being miserable. I take all the responsibility. If I ever grumble with so much as one frown after we're married, you're at liberty to go right away and leave me. I love you, my dear one. Do you think I haven't gone over lots of things in my mind all these weeks? Do you think I didn't fight against this love until it was too strong for me? Give me your hand."

He gave it to her, and she held it to her heart.

"Do you feel how my heart is beating for you? My loved one, I tell you I was born into this world for no other purpose than to love and be loved by you."

The mystery of this tall and fair and beautiful girl standing before him in the yellow March sunlight, standing on the top of the green world under this swooning pale blue sky of early spring, overwhelmed him, so that he fell upon his knees and bowed his head in worship of her. But she not wishing to stand so far above him dropped beside him, and where his hand had lain she drew close his head so that he could listen to the beating of her passionate heart, while all around them the air whispered with the song of linnets, fluttering in melodious companies on their careless way across the downs.

CHAPTER XVIII

FATHER AND LOVER

MAURICE AVERY disconcerted his daughter that afternoon by getting in beside the chauffeur for the return journey. She thought that it was asking too much of her to sit tranquilly in the back seat of the car, while immediately in front the most critical conversation of her whole life was being carried on just out of earshot.

"No, no," her father said firmly to her protest. "I have one or two things to talk about with Abel, and I'm afraid you'll have to keep yourself company. You can always go to sleep, you know."

Coral saw that it would be useless to argue, and retired to the back of the car in a state of agitation of which she would never have believed herself capable even so short a time ago as yesterday.

Maurice felt a little ashamed of tackling his chauffeur while he was driving the car. It looked like taking an unfair advantage of his position, and as if he were insisting overmuch on the relation of master to servant. At the same time, he reassured himself, the young man in such awkward circumstances might welcome the necessity of paying attention to the car. An interview in his library when they reached home would certainly bring them face to face, but in spite of that the relation between them would not be radically altered. And the discussion of this wretched business could not be postponed beyond to-night. Already it had gone dreadfully far. The way Coral had calmly taken the young man off to the downs

Father and Lover

this morning was a lamentable condemnation of paternal authority.

"Abel, I have something very serious to talk to you about."

The young man flashed a sidelong, slanting glance at him, and for the fraction of a second the car seemed to be going to swerve.

"Those eyes—where have I seen them before?" Maurice thought; and then, the prey of an immense embarrassment, he continued aloud:

"It's about you and my daughter, Abel. She has told me that you have some ridiculous notion of becoming engaged. Surely, surely you realize that such a thing is quite out of the question?"

"Well, I didn't suppose that you'd like it," Frank admitted, his eyes fixed on the road before him, his hands steering the car with an almost finicking care.

"It's not a question of our not liking it—Mrs. Avery and myself—it's a sheer impossibility not only from her point of view, but equally from yours. I am not blaming you for your behaviour, because I perfectly understand, humiliating as it is to acknowledge it, that my daughter was the—was the—well, the producer of this situation."

"Oh, no, she wasn't, then," Frank said sharply, and, pressing the accelerator, he made the car leap forward as if to escape the odious atmosphere of such a suggestion. "I'd rather you didn't say things like that, sir," he went on. "You'll get me angry, and I'll be saying things to you, sir, I'll be sorry for afterwards. Nobody couldn't have behaved less like what you think than what she did. I don't know however I dared to tell her I loved her, for she was standing all the while like a queen before me. But I do love her. Yes, I know you'll say I've no right to love anyone so high above me, and if I tried to explain you wouldn't understand what I was getting at."

Coral

All the while his chauffeur was speaking Maurice was feeling a strange sympathy with him, so that when he fell silent he had positively to make an effort of will not to bid him go ahead and be happy in his love. He had the sensation that this talk in the whirring car had all happened before somehow, as if it were but the distortion of some shining and untrammelled talk held in another existence and upon another plane of being.

"Well, I'd better not try to apportion the blame," he said. "What has happened has happened. I recognize the love you each have for the other. Indeed, I will go further and say that I understand it."

Again that sidelong, slanting glance, and again Maurice plunged back into the past to search his memory for where he had met this young man before.

"But though I may understand your love, I also understand a great deal more of the world than either of you, and I know that even the greatest love is not proof against material difficulties."

"If anybody loves anybody else enough," Frank argued, "I don't see why there need be such difficulties."

"Well, in the first place, you won't have enough money to keep Coral as she has been accustomed to live." Maurice felt that he ought to be talking about "my daughter" or even "Miss Avery," but he could not bring himself to do this. "That will worry you, and you'll begin to think that she's regretting the step she took. She will be conscious of this, and she won't dare to criticize anything you give her, and that will make her strained and unnatural. The alternative is that I should make you an allowance, which, up to a point, I could well afford to do, but you wouldn't like that . . ."

"No, I shouldn't. I shouldn't like it at all," Frank snapped.

"Quite so. Your pride would be injured, and you

Father and Lover

would resent that. Then, in addition to the money there's the difference in outlook. Personally, I don't think it's ever wise for a man to take a wife out of his own station in life. But that is sometimes a success, because women are more adaptable than men. A man is not adaptable. You'd find it impossible to get into her way of thinking and talking and behaving, and then you'd begin to resent her superiority. You couldn't help it, Abel. Whatever resolutions you made not to be affected by that superiority, you'd be conscious of it, and it would either sap your self-reliance or destroy your self-respect. And if there were a child, she would inevitably want that child to be brought up like herself. The instinct of a woman is always to rise. The whole history of the evolution of the human race is the tale of woman's ambition to improve man. Very well, then, you wouldn't be able to afford to give your child the education she would want for it, and I should offer to educate it, and you would resent that and perhaps refuse me the privilege. No, no, believe me, Abel, such a marriage is not reasonable. And if I were to sanction it, still more if I were to encourage it, I should be injuring my daughter and I should be injuring you. Believe me, it's not that I have any dislike for you personally. If such a marriage were possible at all, I should be willing to believe that this marriage stood as fair a chance of success as any. I am not in a position to forbid it, because Coral is of age, and if she chooses to reject my advice she can do so. I am not even going to threaten that if she marries you I will ostracize her. . . ."

"What's that?" Frank cut in sharply.

"Why, disinherit her, disown her, cut her out of our family life, refuse to have any more communication with her. I shan't. But I ask you to put it to yourself if you are treating her fairly. It's up to you to stop it. If you like, I'll put it this way. I throw myself on your mercy."

Coral

Maurice stopped and looked round to see what Coral was doing all this while at the back of the car. He was startled by the vision of her beauty, for she had fallen asleep, and her face lay upon the cushion as still as a gathered rose. This rare tranquillity filled him with disquietude. She had started off in such an agitation of spirit, and already so divinely sure must she be of herself she had fallen asleep. What warnings of age would deter a girl like that from taking the path she had chosen? He turned round again in something like awe to hear Frank's reply to his appeal.

"I'll think over what you've said to-night, sir, if you don't mind. I don't feel I can answer right off. Well, I've got to think about the car a bit, haven't I?"

Maurice decided that it would be wise not to pursue the subject, and turning round again he regarded his daughter's beauty where she lay back asleep in the car.

CHAPTER XIX

FRANK AND HIS AUNT

THE car was not required that night, so Frank went back early to Dairymaids Row. His aunt, who had had but little of his company lately, was glad to see him; but soon his pre-occupation began to stir up a multitude of anxious questions in her mind. She tried to keep them from being expressed by busying herself with the preparation of an extra good tea to celebrate his evening at home. She tried to rouse Frank by giving him all the gossip of her little circumscribed existence in Islington.

"I went to the Pictures on Wednesday night, Frank. I thought I'd try the Rotunda for a change. Well, anyone wants a change sometimes, don't they? But afterwards I was sorry I went, because all the films was rotten, and the woman sitting next to me was sucking cough lozenges, and on the other side there was two fellows trying to be comic cuts, and two soppy girls in front giggling at them all the time and encouraging them, and I was in two minds whether I wouldn't say, 'Well, if you don't want to look at the pictures, there's people here who does.' And then I thought I'd get up and walk right out. Yes, and I would have done, only I wasn't going to give them the pleasure of thinking they'd driven me out of the place."

Frank yawned, and leant a little nearer to the fire.

"Well, even if you don't want to listen to what I'm telling you," said his aunt indignantly, "you needn't

Coral

yawn. There was a time once when you'd badger the life out of me to tell you a story, and not so long ago, either."

"I'm sorry, auntie," Frank said. "I wasn't yawning at what you were saying. Only I've been driving in the country to-day and the air's made me a bit sleepy. Besides, I've been thinking enough to make anybody yawn. I'll be all right when I've had a cup of tea."

But when Frank sat down to the table he roused his aunt's indignation by not eating anything.

"Whatever in the world's the matter with the boy?" she demanded of high Heaven.

"Well, I'm not hungry."

"Not hungry, when you've been driving all those miles? Don't talk so silly. You must be hungry. And don't you see what I've opened for you?"

"The potted meat," said Frank apologetically. "Well, if you'd asked me I'd have said not to, auntie. Because really I don't feel as if I could tackle potted meat, not this evening."

"Potted meat!" she scoffed. "Why, it's Gentleman's Relish, which you always has on your birthday."

It was now the turn of Frank to scoff.

"Gentleman's Relish! Yes, that 'ud be just right if I *was* a gentleman. Only I had it well rubbed into me this afternoon that I wasn't."

"Who's been rubbing it in?" his aunt inquired fiercely.

"Well, Mr. Avery, if you want to know."

It was no use. Frank felt that he could not any longer keep to himself the problem of his behaviour. It might be that his aunt would give the same advice as Mr. Avery about the future; but at least if she did she would do so from his point of view. Not that Mr. Avery

Frank and His Aunt

had been altogether blind to that. Or had he? And had all that talk been so much eyewash, because he was afraid of his power over Coral?

While these thoughts were passing through her nephew's mind, May Raeburn's eyes were fixed on the picture of her sister above the mantelpiece. Surely now was the moment to reveal the history of all these years. Yes, surely now . . . or never? Would it not be kinder, since he himself had never asked about the past, to let the past lie still?

"Mr. Avery been rubbing it in about you not being a gentleman? Well, I'd like to know, I'm bound to say, whatever in the world it's got to do with him. I never knew till now that chauffeurs was expected to have pedigrees the same as fox-terriers. A gentleman, indeed! And how did he come to be talking to *you* about gentlemen?"

She asked the question to gain time for herself to revolve once more in her mind the decision which must presently be made.

"Well, if you want to know," Frank said, rising abruptly from the table and marching round the little room with his hands deep in his pockets. "If you really want to know, it's because I'm going to marry his daughter."

Frank had not supposed that his announcement would leave his aunt unimpressed; but he had never for a moment anticipated what an effect it would have upon her. She could not have stared at him with more horror if he had brought back a ghost from hell to be his bride.

"It seems to worry you," he said in an awkward attempt to laugh away the effect of his revelation.

"I'd sooner see you dead at my feet than married to his daughter. Do you know who Mr. Avery was?"

Coral

A sudden terror now seized Frank. Had not Mr. Avery continually referred to his fancy of having seen him somewhere before, alluded many a time to the extraordinary familiarity of his face? Had he not gone further that afternoon and as good as told him that he felt a quite unusual sympathy with him, and that in spite of the shock it must have been to him to hear about Coral's determination to marry his chauffeur? Was the fear that had lurked all these years at the back of his mind justified? Was it going to be worse than anything he had ever imagined? Was his aunt's unwillingness for him to take service with Mr. Avery due to the fact that he was Mr. Avery's son? Frank reeled at the thought of what this meant, and sank down into a chair, his head between his knees, in an agony of terror at what he might in another moment know without doubt. It seemed to him that the room had suddenly turned inky black, and that a whirlwind was shrieking round his cowering form.

"No, I don't know who Mr. Avery was in particular," he murmured, and reached across for the cup of tea because his mouth was utterly dry.

"All these years, Frank," his aunt said, "you've never asked me about your father, not who he was, nor nothing about him."

"Stop, you've said enough!" Frank cried. "I always guessed I was a bastard, but I never guessed *he* was my father. What have I done to suffer this?" he groaned.

"Go on, you silly boy, you're nothing of the kind. So that's why you never asked me the question I always worried my heart out you would ask one day. Well, fancy you thinking that! The ideas people get."

"Well, if it isn't that," Frank demanded, looking up, "what's all the mystery about?"

"If you can listen without yawning I'll tell you."

Frank and His Aunt

Frank stared at his aunt in amazement. She had always seemed such a frail little thing, so tender and sweet; but now, with black eyes blazing in a chalk-white face and with shoulders huddled round her in the intensity of her emotion, she appeared a malevolent little squat idol carved out of ivory.

CHAPTER XX

THE OLD MAID'S TALE

"WELL, first of all," May began, "your name isn't Frank Abel. It's Frank Abel Trewhella. Frank was the name your mother give you, and Abel was the name your father stuck on to it because it was a religious-sounding name, and he was potty on religion, your father was. But that didn't keep him from murdering your mother, and which is why I never told you nothing about him."

"Murdering my mother? My father a murderer?" Frank gasped.

"Yes, and got hung for it, thank God!" his aunt went on. "Though there was some people silly enough and soft enough to get up a petition for him, trying to make out he was mad and all that. Mad! He wasn't no more mad than anyone is who lets theirselves go, and don't do nothing only bellow all day Sunday in a chapel and behave as they like on week-days. But he was hung all right in Bodmin. And you was a baby boy of two, and I held you up to the window when the black flag was hoisted to say he was dead; but you wouldn't remember it, because you wasn't but just two years and a month old, and I said, 'Clap your hands, duckie, at the pretty flag,' and you clapped because you could see it fluttering in the wind on a fine morning in October, and it was her birthday morning."

May bent down and sobbed.

"Oh, my little sister, my darling, my darling, when they brought you back to the farm that foggy summer

The Old Maid's Tale

day and your hair was all glistening with silver drops and you was dead, my darling! And, oh, when shall I die and be with you again? The years have been so long."

Then she sat up again and went on with her tale.

"When your mother set out for the last walk she ever took on earth, I told you to say 'ta-ta' nicely to her, and you banged your hands upon the window-pane, and she looked back once and waved, and then she disappeared in the mist. I said to myself, 'Oo-er, she do look like a ghost walking away through the mist!' I thought it was unlucky to say that, and I touched wood; but it didn't do a bit of good, because all the time he must have been creeping and creeping along behind her with the gun."

"But what's Mr. Avery got to do with all this?" Frank asked.

"What hasn't Mr. Avery got to do with it, you mean," his aunt cried, the old fire blazing up again in her eyes in spite of the tears that had temporarily quenched it. "Why, it was through him your mother was killed."

Frank sat in a bewildered silence.

"You see, before your mother ever married that Trewhella she loved Maurice Avery. I never thought she had it in her to love like she did. But she loved him with every bit of her, and in one way he loved her. Only he didn't want to marry her, because she wasn't a lady."

Frank moved as if to speak, but his aunt held up her hand.

"Stop, you needn't get arguing about that now. Let me finish now I've begun. Well, Maurice—I always think of him as Maurice," she explained, "because though it's years ago, and they've been long years for me, in one way it only seems yesterday, and I always called him Maurice the same as she did. He wasn't stuck up not in that way. Well, if he hadn't treated Jenny so

Coral

badly I'd have said he was as nice a fellow as you could meet anywhere. Well, Maurice wanted Jenny to go and live with him, only she wouldn't. And then he asked her to go out to Spain to him, and when she wouldn't, he never came back. She went to meet him at the station, and he never came. And after that she didn't seem to care what happened to her. Mr. Castleton—you know, my friend who helps me look after what little money I've got—he was very kind, and he's told me since that he begged her to marry him instead, but she wouldn't, because he reminded her all the time of Maurice and the days when she was happy. Well, then everything seemed to drag, and our mother died and we was all alone, and one day this farmer Trewhella asked Jenny to marry him, and she did marry him. He was always terribly jealous because she'd been on the stage, and one day Mr. Castleton came down to Cornwall where we lived and there was a shocking scene over him. But when you was just over eighteen months old Maurice came back all of a sudden, but of course Jenny wouldn't have nothing to say to him, though he kept trying to tell her how sorry he was for what he'd done. And at last it got on her nerves him hanging about all the while in the neighbourhood, and she arranged to meet him one morning when Trewhella said he was going to Plymouth. She wanted to tell him to go away and not worry her any more, because there was sure to be a row sooner or later. Anyhow, Trewhella must have guessed she was going to meet Maurice, and he never went to Plymouth at all; and he followed her through the fog, and while she was telling Maurice to go away and not worry her any more he shot her in the throat and killed her. And when Maurice was in the witness-box, the lawyer who was defending Trewhella tried to make out her and Maurice was having a love affair, and that made

The Old Maid's Tale

me so angry I stood up in court and shouted out that the lawyer was a liar. But Maurice told the truth and didn't spare himself; and when I was in the box I prayed God that the things I was asked would hang him, and they did. They said my evidence was damning, and when the jury came in and the foreman called out 'guilty' I wanted to shout 'hurrah,' but I didn't because I was afraid they'd think I'd given evidence against him just because I wanted to see him hung. I arranged with Mr. Castleton that after the hanging I'd take you right away and call you by another name. He tried to persuade me not to go to Bodmin, but of course I went. And ever since then I've looked after you, Frank. Well, just before your mother went out that morning I said to her, 'I'll look after young Frank when you're gone.' All I meant was I wouldn't let you eat the wool off of a toy lamb, and which you always would do if ever you got the chance. But afterwards the words came back to me, and it seemed like as if I'd made her a promise to look after you altogether. Of course, I only meant when she was gone for her walk, but afterwards I felt it meant when she was gone for ever—for ever," May repeated, the tears welling up again and quenching the blaze of those wrathful eyes. "So I took you, Frank, and with what Mr. Castleton got together for me I bought this little house, which is near where Jenny and me lived when we was children in Hagworth Street. Only they've cut down the big tree at the corner now. I'm sorry if I done you a wrong by not telling you all this before, Frank, but I thought you'd be happier not knowing your father killed your mother, and if I've done wrong in telling you now I'm sorry. Only when you said you wanted to marry Maurice Avery's daughter I thought it would be wrong to let you do it."

"Why?" Frank demanded.

Coral

"Well, it would be. After the way he treated your mother you wouldn't want to go and marry his daughter."

"Wouldn't I? That's just where you're wrong, auntie. I'll marry her now in spite of anything anybody says or does. My mother wasn't good enough for him, wasn't she? So he couldn't marry her, couldn't he? And I'm not good enough for his daughter, aren't I? Maybe I'm not, but I can marry her, and, by G——, I will!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE CHEQUE

THE effect on Frank of his aunt's talk was not so much to make him love Coral less as to make him love himself more, so that while his desire to possess her was even sharper than before, his ambition was stimulated to an excessive pitch. The tendency of late had been to let his own work be absorbed by her and to believe that the prosperity of his love was of greater importance than the achievement of his ambition. And he had felt that, if his invention did succeed, the pleasure of that success would lie in the demonstration to the world of his right to aspire to her hand. Now his invention became once more the object of his life, not so much to justify himself for marrying a girl out of his own station, as to justify the self that was aware its father had been hanged as a murderer. He felt now towards his work an affection and a tenderness that he no longer felt towards Coral. He thought her the loveliest and most desirable woman on earth; but he loved her now as a man loves a horse or a dog, as something quite external to himself. He loved her because he intended to make her his and to mould her to his form, even if in the moulding he should mar her. And lastly he loved her because in loving and winning her he was avenging his mother.

The first impulse of Frank, when he woke after a long night of wrestling with the phantoms of the past and with the visions of the future, was to go immediately to Mr. Avery, tell him that he intended to marry his

Coral

daughter, and explain the reason why. On second thoughts, however, he decided that such a course might blunt the edge of his revenge. It might even happen that Mr. Avery would welcome such a marriage as a means of quieting his own conscience, for surely he must often be haunted by the memory of that girl who first through his heartlessness and then through his imprudence had been murdered. No, let him go on being haunted by remorse. He should never know that his daughter was expiating her father's sin. And then a thought as cold and grey and stealthy as the London dawn crept into Frank's mind. Why should he marry Coral at all? Why should he not. . . . But even as the chirping of the sparrows broke in upon the sly greyness of the dawn the bright vision of Coral standing beside him yesterday on the sunny Wiltshire turf returned and drove the dim and stealthy temptation forth from his mind.

When Frank was dressed, he looked round the little room with a grunt of satisfaction.

"Yes," he said aloud, "yes, she'll find this a bit different to what she's been used to up till now."

May Raeburn was astonished to see her nephew come down to breakfast more cheerful than he had been for weeks; and when, after breakfast, he left the house whistling, she wished she had not told him anything, for it seemed to her that Frank was altogether without human feeling and that the better side of his nature had been corrupted by this girl.

Frank, however, was cheerful because his way stretched clear before him. Riding down to the garage that morning on the top of a bus, he was filled with a sense of creation. A few more experiments with motive power, a few more experiments with material, and he should astonish the whole world. All these people that now crawled along the crowded pavements of London

The Cheque

would be changed from caterpillars to butterflies. No more traffic problems to be solved. No more living in dingy cities. All men free as the birds of the air. No more wars. Why, he should be hailed as the greatest benefactor of humanity since . . . but Frank's knowledge of history was not wide enough to supply him with a predecessor.

Later on that morning he asked for an interview with Mr. Avery.

"Ah, good morning, Abel. You've come to give me the answer to our conversation yesterday?"

"I've come to give you notice, sir."

Avery nodded his head.

"Well, you know how sorry I shall be to lose you, but of course I realized that you wouldn't be able to stay on. I was prepared for this."

"And I'd like to leave at once."

"Yes, yes, I perfectly understand, and indeed it would be better from every point of view."

Frank eyed him contemptuously, wondering how any man could be so dense as not to perceive that the reason for his leaving him was the very contrary of what he supposed it was. But, as he did not perceive it, he let him rest in his ignorance. He would have enough to shock him presently.

"But I'd like to speak to"—Frank hesitated for a moment before he decided to be diplomatic—"to Miss Avery before I go. Perhaps you wouldn't mind if I took her for a drive? And then I'd like to hand over the car this evening."

Maurice felt a little uneasy of the influence Coral might have on his chauffeur's plucky decision. He would have liked to suggest that the young man should vanish without another word, but he supposed that he should be asking too much of him if he asked that. It were more

Coral

prudent not to put too great a strain on his good intentions. He would talk to Coral first himself and beg her, for the sake of her own dignity, even if she cared nothing about the dignity of her family, not to try to change the young man's mind.

"Very well," he told him. "I consent to your taking my daughter for a drive this afternoon. And I hope you will allow me to express my appreciation of your good sense and good will by writing you out a cheque. You needn't refuse it out of pride. I made no attempt to buy you off, remember. This money is merely a tangible expression of my gratitude. Why do you smile?" Maurice asked in a hurt voice.

Frank could not tell him that he was smiling because it had suddenly struck him that if he had married Coral in the ordinary way her father would have had to pay the expenses of the wedding, and that therefore it seemed only just that he should accept this present, which would be useful enough for his work. But instead of explaining all this, he answered that he did not know he was smiling.

Maurice Avery went to his desk, wrote out a cheque for £100, and handed it to the young man, whose accommodating behaviour had so agreeably surprised him.

CHAPTER XXII

MAURICE AND CORAL

MAURICE was pleased that the difficult business of breaking off this insane match had been carried through by himself without having to say a word about it to his wife. Of course, Coral would always have been sure to tell him long before she told her mother, but she might not have been able to tell him before her mother found out for herself what was going on. That would have been the very deuce. In fact, it would probably have ended in Coral's eloping with the young man. And then what would Constance have done? Poor Constance, it was not fair to laugh at her. She had been an admirable wife of the conventional type, especially considering that she had five thousand a year of her own. But Maurice soon forgot all about his wife in wondering how his daughter was going to take this swift shattering of her dream. He rang the bell and told the parlourmaid to ask Miss Coral to come and speak to him. He had made up his mind what line he should take.

"Coral, I have just seen young Abel, and he has given me his answer," he began at once when she came into the room.

She stood flushed and expectant, waiting for him to go on.

"And he has seen the impossibility of such a match. He is leaving my service at once."

"Do you mean that he is willing to give me up?"

"Well, not exactly willing, my dear child, but ready.

Coral

He has had time to think over what I said to him yesterday during the drive back from Merryfield."

"I don't believe it," Coral exclaimed. "I don't believe he *could* give me up even if he wanted to."

"Now, listen, Coral, I really must beg of you not to take that line. It isn't reasonable, and it's hardly decent for a girl of your age to talk as if she were a kind of Cleopatra."

"But I don't believe it, father. You simply don't understand what love means."

"Coral, you and I have been good friends now for many years—intimate friends, haven't we?"

"We have been, but we shan't be friends any longer," she proclaimed.

"Well, I venture to hope that we shall," her father said gently. "And do, my dear child, do give me the pleasure of sitting down while I say what I've got to say. If you insist on walking about the room like that, you'll never be able to look at things from a less tragical standpoint."

"How you can sit there sneering at me I simply don't know," Coral exclaimed. "Surely by now you must realize that I am not the kind of girl to imagine myself in love with a man? Surely the very fact that I have chosen somebody so unsuitable in the eyes of the world ought to be enough to tell you that I am in deadly earnest?"

"I do realize it, my dear child," he said. "And if I gave you the impression that I was laughing at you, I beg your pardon. It's for the sake of my own nerves that I ask you to sit down. I want to tell you something about myself which will help you to understand my point of view a little better."

Coral plunged into an arm-chair.

"Do you remember the night you went with your

Maurice and Coral

mother and Lucius to the Orient? It was the night that Digby smashed up the Rolls, and that led to my engaging Abel."

"Of course I remember that night."

"Do you remember that I wouldn't come? "

She nodded.

"Well, the reason was that years ago I loved a girl who danced in the ballet there. Do you remember that Lucius went along to watch the girls coming out of the stage door, and that he asked me to join him, and how annoyed with him I was? Well, I used to wait for this girl every night, and, Coral, I loved her as much as you love this young chauffeur."

Here Maurice paused, for in his anxiety to tell Coral about his own unfortunate love affair he had forgotten that the details of the old story were not really in the least appropriate to the matter in hand.

"And what happened?" Coral asked.

"Well, I knew it would be impossible for us to be married."

"Why? "

"Because it wouldn't have been fair to her to marry her."

Coral laughed loudly.

"It really isn't anything to laugh at," Maurice said angrily. "I gave her up, and spent four miserable years in regretting it. And then she married somebody else who killed her out of jealousy."

"But why are you telling me this, my dear father? " she asked.

"To prove to you that I can understand how much I'm asking you to do when I ask you to give up this man."

"Yes, it may prove that, but it doesn't prove that you were right to give her up. It seems to me that you completely messed up your life by giving up this girl.

Coral

If you loved her, you ought to have married her. You would have been far happier with her than you ever have been or are ever likely to be with mother."

"Coral, I really must insist. . . ."

But she disregarded his interruption.

"I don't want to have a married life like yours and mother's. Superficially, no doubt, people would call such a marriage a success. I don't think so. The most successful part of it has been our friendship, which might have lasted for ever if you could have brought yourself to admit that my happiness lies in marrying the man I have chosen. Do you think that I didn't argue all this out with myself for months? Do you suppose I've just been carried away by a momentary impulse? I tell you that Frank is as much mine as if there were nobody else in the world except him and me."

"But, Coral, if I may say so without being accused of brutal cynicism, all young people who fall very much in love think that the whole cosmic force of the universe has been directed to nothing since the beginning of time except fashioning those two young people for each other."

"Well, that's what I do think about Frank and me," she said. "Every individual thinks the same about himself, because every individual is to himself the centre of the universe, until he meets the other individual made for him. And then the two of them become the centre of the universe."

"That may be," said Maurice. "But in this case, luckily, one of these ultimate products of evolution has perceived that he is not the centre of the universe. He has accepted from me a cheque for £100 and is leaving my service."

Coral turned white.

"It can't be true."

"You will find that it is perfectly true," he assured

Maurice and Coral

her. "He only asked one favour, which was that he should take you for a drive this afternoon. To that I agreed with some misgivings, but I have confidence in the young man's good faith. All I ask is that you should not try to upset his resolve."

"If he has taken a hundred pounds from you to give me up, I shall never trouble him," Coral vowed. "You may be sure of that."

Maurice showed her the counterfoil in his cheque-book.

"You said he might take me for a drive this afternoon?"

"I did."

"There was no need for that, because I shall never drive with him again."

Maurice's conscience pricked him a little when Coral left him, but he excused himself for not telling the actual truth by saying that it was probably better this way, and that after all the young man had got his money.

CHAPTER XXIII

TEARS

CORAL went up to her own room and wept. She was not a girl that cried easily. Tears had presented themselves to her childish imagination as the most shameful things to which a child might succumb. When she had wept, she had wept her heart out, but she could count such surrenders on the fingers of one hand. Those fits of weeping were conspicuous dates in her life. Now, in the thought of how Frank had humiliated her, she gave way uncontrollably. She was lying on her bed when her maid came up to ask if two o'clock would be too early for Abel to bring the car round.

"I'm not going out this afternoon. I've got a bad headache."

The maid came back and said that Abel thought there must be some mistake, as he had been told specially that Miss Coral required the car, and the weather was very fine.

"Tell him I am not going out this afternoon," Coral said angrily. "Nor am I coming down to lunch. Nor do I want to be disturbed again."

"Very well, miss."

When the maid was gone, Coral locked her door and abandoned herself to the thought that life was finished. The disappointment over Frank was too bitter to be endured. It was not the grief of losing him. It was the complete destruction of his personality in her mind

that was overwhelming her. He had nothing of all that with which she had endowed him. He had seemed to her like steel, and he had proved to be tin.

Coral would have liked to take a long walk by herself during the afternoon, but she was afraid of meeting Frank, and so she kept her room till tea-time. After tea, however, she did go out, and walked along the Embankment in the sapphirine March twilight. It was not yet forty-eight hours ago, she thought, since he and she had driven along here; and presently she came to Vauxhall Bridge Road, and waited, as they had waited together in the car, to allow a tram to pass. On the left was the timber-yard where the pale figureheads of old ships, now for ever immotionable, breasted the blue dusk. There was something in Coral that might have reminded the imaginative observer of one of those figureheads, when she stood near them, poised upon the kerbstone of Vauxhall Bridge Road. To say truth, she could not make up her mind to cross, for she knew that if she should once find herself on the other side of the road she should not be able to keep from pressing on until she reached Chelsea Bridge and the straight reach of the Thames. And, if she went as far as that, she should inevitably go farther and not finish her walk until she came to the Cremorne Arms and saw the Electric Power Station looming. She turned abruptly and went back to Little Queen Street.

The idea occurred to her of going to dance at the Talisman, and so utterly had Frank's behaviour humiliated her that she felt no lack of pride in the notion of ringing up Cecil Denham to take her there. However, her mother wanted to go to the theatre, and Coral accompanied her. The play was dull; the woman in front of her was wearing an imperfectly cured skunk wrap to keep off draughts; on her right a bald-headed gentleman

Coral

was behaving like a landed fish. Yet Coral welcomed these minor annoyances because they served as an excuse for her own sadness, which would otherwise have made her mother suppose that it was assumed on purpose to annoy her.

When Coral came wearily back from the theatre, she begged to be excused from eating any supper, and went straight up to bed. She had taken off her wrap, and was shuddering at the prospect of the long sleepless night that she knew lay before her, when she heard three taps upon her window. The window of Coral's room looked out upon the wide stretch of waste ground that ran between the back of Little Queen Street and the Embankment. The suitability of such a field of operations for burglary had often been commented upon, and she was on the verge of running out of her room to call for help when she heard her name gently called from outside. She pulled back the curtains and saw, holding on to the top of the lowered window, Frank's hand. She had watched that hand on the steering-wheel of the car too many hours together to make a mistake.

"How *did* you get there?" she gasped in amazement.

"I climbed up the drainpipe," he said, pulling down the window far enough to look into the room. "I very nearly came right in. Only I thought you wouldn't like that unless you said I might. But I'm beginning to feel a bit stiff. I've been here since half-past nine. Why didn't you come for that drive with me? Your father gave me permission to take you out in the car. I've left now, and there won't be another opportunity. You might have known I wouldn't have sent up twice unless it was something extra important."

"Did you want to explain to me your reasons for letting my father buy you off for a hundred pounds?" Coral asked scornfully.

"Yes, that was rather a wheeze, wasn't it?" Frank laughed.

"A what?"

"Well, a joke, if you like it better. I didn't see why he shouldn't pay for the wedding. It would have cost him more if you'd been marrying Lord Helpus or the Honourable Blinking Vere de Vere. But, look here, Coral, let me come in and talk to you properly for a few minutes. It's your fault if I have to talk to you this way, because you wouldn't come for that drive."

He did not wait for her to give her consent, but pushed down the sash, threw his legs over the top, and slid lightly down into the room.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE BOLD LOVER

WHEN Frank stood before Coral in that rose-bloomed room of girlhood, it seemed to her that in his black and shining jerkin he was like a knight-at-arms. She felt that in another moment the whole pretty and familiar scene of her youth would collapse like a stage scene and that she should be left in utter darkness, suspended shivering over an immense void until he should clasp her to him and she should feel his arms around her like warm steel. The insignificance of her setting when it was thus crashed into by something really significant overwhelmed her.

"My darling," she cried, swaying towards him.

He stood unresponsive and scowling. It was like throwing herself upon a bayonet to draw near him. Yet she did not wince, but she clasped him in her arms and kissed him full on that mouth which was fine and red as silk. He made no motion to thrust her from him, although his lips would not give back the kiss.

"You can scarcely blame me," Coral insisted, "for believing that you had taken money from father to give me up."

"You ought to have come out with me this afternoon in the car," Frank replied sullenly. "Not made me spend all the evening hanging outside your window like a monkey in the Zoo."

"Ah, I can't be so very sorry, Frank, because I'm sure at last that you love me. You must love me to do that."

The Bold Lover

"Yes, that's all very fine," he continued. "But don't you get thinking, womanlike, that you've got to spend all your time inventing new ways of finding out how much a man cares about you. That might work with some, but it won't work with me. I was in two minds to-night once or twice whether I wouldn't clear off for good and all."

Coral nearly laughed aloud, remembering the indignation and contempt she had been feeling this afternoon. Now here she was, having to excuse her own behaviour in Frank's eyes. And of all places in which to be doing it, she thought, looking round this rosy bedroom at the photographs of school-friends who would certainly never play such scenes as this in their conventional lives, and at the photographs of the various men friends who had danced so well, but not one of whom would ever climb up to her bedroom window by a drain-pipe, however deep in love with her he might fall.

"Why are you laughing?" he asked angrily.

"I'm laughing, my dear, because I'm happy. I was the most miserable girl in England this afternoon, and this evening. . . ."

"You went out this evening in spite of you being so miserable," he interrupted.

"Only to an extremely dull play to keep my mother company, and a wretched evening I spent. But now I find that I have not lost you, and that you did not . . . but, Frank, did you let my father think you intended to give me up? You must have done, or he would never have given you that money."

"Yes, I let him think so," Frank replied. "But I never said a word myself about giving you up. It was him jumped to the conclusion I meant to do that. But listen, Coral, there's no question now of you or me being engaged or any of that. We've either got to get married

Coral

or I'm going away out of this country for good and all."

"I'll marry you to-morrow," she assured him.

Her frankness made him feel ashamed, and for a moment he was tempted to tell her the story his aunt had told him the night before. But he checked the impulse, and instead he took her in his arms, telling himself that, after all, he loved her truly, irrespective of his revenge.

"You know what it means to marry me?" he asked, gazing down into her eyes as if in their clear azure depths he could perceive the shadows of the future. "It means a rough time for you, my girl. Because it'll be you that is marrying me, not me that marries you."

"What do you mean by that?" she exclaimed, withdrawing from his embrace.

"Why, I mean that you'll have to live my style of life and not for ever be expecting me to rise to your style."

"What else should I do?"

She was back once more in his arms.

"Frank, all I care about is you. I'm not marrying you to gratify a whim. I'm marrying you because you are the only man in the world for me. I'd be wounded if you did not treat me as you would treat any other woman of your choice."

There were footsteps along the passage outside Coral's room. The two lovers sprang away from each other in sudden affright. A door closed, and all was silent again outside.

"That's what I can't stand," Frank muttered resentfully. "The sooner we're married, you and me, the better. I hate to feel afraid of footsteps—well, not afraid of them, because if it come to it I wouldn't be afraid, but jumpy, and sort of thinking I've no business to be where I am. The sooner you and me are married the better."

The Bold Lover

"I'll marry you to-morrow," she vowed, and so radiant was she in this moment that all the rosy glow of the room seemed to be but an emanation of her and to owe nothing to the electric light.

"Well, I went into that this afternoon," Frank continued. "And from what I can make out, even if I get a licence we'd have a day or two to wait. Only the trouble is that you'd have to be married in your parish church, which is round the corner in Brown Square. What about the parson? Does he know you? Or, wait a minute. I suppose we can be married in my parish church. Yes, it would take a bit of nerve just to walk round the corner and perhaps run into somebody on the way out."

They discussed for awhile the technique of a secret wedding, and in the end it was decided to wait until April and be married in Islington on the Wednesday of Easter week.

"I shall have my quarter's allowance," Coral said. "And it would be silly not to make sure of that for the last time. I shall want to buy a few things."

"You don't want to go buying too much," Frank warned her. "The less you start in buying the better. You've got to start in some time and learn not to spend money."

"I only want a few simple things," she explained. "Well, aprons, for instance."

"Haven't you got enough aprons?" he exclaimed. "No, I suppose you wouldn't have. I was forgetting. Well, I'd better be going along. I'll be pretty busy myself for the next fortnight. I've got to get another job for one thing, and then I'll want a few bits of extra furniture, though, of course, we'll have to live with my aunt, anyway, for a start. We'd better meet somewhere to-morrow. Say six o'clock outside Westminster Bridge Station."

Coral

A moment later and he was a dark shape in the night, moving rapidly across the waste ground behind Little Queen Street.

Coral undressed, thinking what a wonderful thing life was when you were going to meet the man you loved outside Westminster Bridge Station at six o'clock the next day, and when, still more wonderful, you were going to marry him in April.

"And April's gloriously near," she sighed to her pillow.

CHAPTER XXV

THE QUESTION OF TASTE

MAY RAEBURN entreated her nephew to take the advice of Mr. Castleton before he committed the folly of marrying Maurice Avery's daughter.

"Now listen, auntie, it's not a blessed bit of use you trying to work things so as I don't marry Coral. If you keep on like this, all I'll do is take her somewhere else to live, and you know you won't like being left all alone."

"I don't know as I wouldn't," she retorted. "I don't reckon I want that kind of company."

But when Frank seemed inclined to take her at her word by discussing nice little four-roomed houses he had seen at Ealing or Finchley his aunt surrendered. She pleaded, however, not to be asked to meet Coral until the marriage was an accomplished fact.

"It'll be all right, then. But if you was to bring her home to tea one afternoon, like you said you wanted to, I might get started off, and then if anything went wrong you'd put all the blame on me."

Frank agreed to the wisdom of this arrangement, and busied himself with the purchase of the various articles of furniture he considered would add the dignity to Dairy-maids Row that married life demanded. He had taken a job with the man at Camden Town who owned taxis, so that he did not have too much time for his preparations.

But when Coral suggested that she should do some of the shopping, her future husband shook his head.

"Not you," he told her bluntly. "You wouldn't know

Coral

what to buy for Dairymaids Row. Why, you'd have all sorts of grand ideas. You'd think you was furnishing Buckingham Palace, *you* would."

Coral acquiesced. Indeed she recognized that he was probably right. One day when Frank drove alongside the pavement outside Westminster Bridge Station, where they always met, she noticed on the top of the taxi a very large rectangle of brown paper.

"My dear, one of your fares has left some of his luggage by mistake. You'd better drive round and leave it at Scotland Yard. I'll wait for you here. You won't be long."

"Step in and don't worry yourself," Frank told her. "That parcel on top is mine. It's a picture."

She did not wait to ask any more questions, because people would stare even at this crowded corner of London to see a girl like herself talking and laughing with a taxi-driver. So she jumped in, and Frank, scrupulously putting down his flag as if for a real fare, drove over Westminster Bridge so that they could sit and talk a while, as was their wont, on the Embankment in front of Lambeth Palace, which was the nearest moderately quiet place where they could loiter without any likelihood of being seen by anybody who knew Coral.

"Oh, Frank, I'm longing to see the picture," she exclaimed.

"Well, it's a bit big to undo here," he objected. "People might think we were going to start some kind of a poppy-show."

"But where did you get it?" she persisted. She was wondering very much in her own mind what subject had tempted Frank to such an extravagance outside his usual purchases.

"Well, I didn't exactly get it," he told her. "I took it."

The Question of Taste

"Took it?" she echoed. "Frank! You didn't steal it?"

"Good lord, no. I took it for a bad debt. I've been getting in what was owed to me by different pals of mine. Money I'd lent and hadn't bothered much about till now, and this fellow he owed me five pounds."

"Quite a large sum," she commented.

He looked at her suspiciously.

"Now, then, don't start laughing, my lady."

She leant over and kissed him quickly, regardless of any inquisitive passer-by that might turn round to stare.

"I'm not laughing, my dearest."

"It sounded a bit as if you was," he told her.

"I wasn't. Truly, I wasn't. I was only being interested in the debt and the picture. Do go on telling me about it."

"This fellow—Joe Barnet his name was—owed me five pound, which I lent him after I won some money in a sweepstake on the Derby four years ago. Well, he paid me back three and threepence the year before last, but since then he hasn't paid me back another penny. I don't know. He said business wasn't too good, and all that."

"What was his business?" Coral asked, for she was determined not to lose any opportunity of familiarizing herself by all possible means with the friendships of the man she was going to marry.

"Well, he did travel a joy-wheel in fairs, but he had to sell it, and since then he's been in a hairdresser's."

"Is it a nice picture, Frank? Do show it to me."

"No; people would stare if I started opening it here. It's not bad. Well, if you want to know, it's a head and shoulders of King Edward just a bit over life-size. I expect it cost more than five pounds once, and it'll fill up one wall and save us buying other pictures."

For a few moments Coral was shaken. She sat in

Coral

silence, looking across the wide greasy river to Westminster, wondering if she were doing right in soon severing herself by much more than the width of the Thames from Westminster. Then she turned and looked at Frank.

"The picture seems to worry you," he said coldly.

If he had apologized for the monstrosity by so much as a blink of the eyelid, she might at that instant have given him up. But his defiance of criticism tamed her. He was as impervious to her opinion of his taste as if he really were the machine he often seemed.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE LICENCE

FRANK demanded Coral's assistance when he sought out the Faculty Office to obtain the marriage licence.

"I shall feel a bit of a fool," he warned her. "You'll have to do the asking. Only, when they want the money, I'll do the paying, don't you forget. Don't you go pulling your purse out and make me look a bigger fool than what I feel."

It was a blue and white April day when side by side on the top of a bus they rode from Westminster to St. Paul's. The flower-women at Charing Cross were selling tulips. Here and there on the crowded pavements of the Strand one saw the first straw hats, and a white butterfly was fluttering round St. Clement Danes.

"Frank, my dear, it wouldn't take very much to start me singing at the top of my voice out of sheer joy," Coral declared.

"For goodness' sake, don't," he begged. "The people on the bus are all staring at your hat, as it is."

"Only because they like it," Coral assured him. "And you like it too, don't you?"

"As a matter of fact, I don't very much," Frank replied discouragingly. "What's it meant to be?"

"My darling, a hat of course."

"I know that much. But they're the most unnatural flowers I ever saw. What are they? Orchids?"

"Orchids! They're blue columbines."

"Well, I've only got your word for it," said Frank sceptically. "Now, how much does a hat like that cost?"

Coral

I'll bet you didn't pay a penny less than fifteen shillings for it."

"It cost six pounds eleven shillings and sixpence."

"How much?"

She repeated the sum.

"Nearly seven pounds for two ounces of straw and a bunch of blue frills! Well, I call it wicked," he exclaimed.

"But if it suits me?"

"Never mind if it suits you or not. You don't want to spend all that to be suited. Don't you start in buying seven-pound hats when we're married, or there'll be trouble in our backyard."

Coral discovered a genuine pleasure in being spoken to like this. After all, deference became very boring, and, anyway, it was undignified for a man to be ordered about by a girl.

"I won't wear any hats at all, my dear. I'll just wear a gay handkerchief tied round my head like a gipsy."

"Not more than once you won't," Frank vowed grimly. "You can buy yourself as good a hat as any girl would want for six-and-eleven. Not six pounds eleven. That's what I'm saying. I've seen them in windows. And you needn't think I'm being disagreeable, because I'm not. It's only I don't want you to start in grumbling that you haven't got the money for hats. If you marry me that means six-and-elevenpenny hats. If you want to back out now it's not too late. We haven't bought the licence yet."

"I wouldn't back out for anything in this world or the next," she whispered.

He caught her hand in his, and for the rest of the journey they sat in silence.

The Faculty Office was a prosaic place; but the clerks who pottered about all day among printed forms possessed

The Licence

a kind of benevolence, and the particular old gentleman who beamed at Coral and Frank over the high barrier impressed them somehow with the fact that it was not so difficult after all to get married.

"Though," as Frank said, when they were coming out, "it's a bit expensive."

"Well, you mustn't spend a great deal on the ring," she told him, for this seemed the right moment to use all the tact she could muster to prevent his buying one of those great wedding rings that seem more like golden fetters than rings.

"I've been thinking about that," Frank said, "and though it would save a bit to get fourteen carat, I don't think I'd feel it was right somehow. I think I'll run to eighteen."

"I wasn't thinking so much of the quality as the quantity," Coral said.

He looked puzzled.

"Darling, I want a very thin ring, the thinnest you can get, and then you can have twenty-one carat gold."

"But what do you want such a thin ring for?" he asked suspiciously.

"Dearest, I don't want to pretend I'm not married," she laughed. "So don't look so fierce. Only, I don't like very thick rings, and as I don't like them, why waste money on getting me one?"

"Yes, but I don't want people to go round saying I stunted you out of a proper wedding ring," he objected.

In the end they compromised for one of medium thickness, and Coral when she was back in Little Queen Street wondered how long after marriage Frank would remain capable of compromising over things. Yet she felt no real doubts about the future.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE WORLD WELL LOST

IN order to make it possible to get her trousseau out of the house without being noticed Coral had asked a girl friend to invite her down to the country. This the girl had done, and she was expected in Sussex on the twenty-fifth of April, which was to be her wedding day. Frank had wanted to wait at the corner of the street, so that when the taxi was whistled for to drive Miss Avery to catch the 12.10 at Victoria it should be he who would appear and carry her off to Islington. But from this Coral had dissuaded him. Anything might go wrong with such an arrangement. Besides, any of the maids at Number Nine would recognize him. It would be most imprudent. No, let her drive in her own taxi to St. Bartholemew's, Islington, and meet him at the church door.

"But what about your luggage?" he asked. "We don't want to keep a taxi ticking off the threepences while we're getting tied up."

"Well, we shall want a taxi to drive us to the station. You couldn't drive us."

"What station?"

"The station for where we're going for our honeymoon."

"But I haven't thought about having a honeymoon," Frank objected. "Anyway, not in the country anywhere. I thought we'd go for a drive in my taxi, say, as far as Richmond, then come home for tea, and perhaps go the the Palladium afterwards."

The World Well Lost

She shook her head.

"We must go out of London for two or three days."

"I don't know that there's so much 'must' about it. Suppose I say I won't?"

Coral knew that this was the moment to test the future by asserting herself before it was too late. But Frank looked so attractive when he stood before her, so attractively dark and slim and defiant, his hand upon his hips, his damson-deep slanting eyes at a sharper slant than she had ever seen them, that Coral could not bear to carry the disagreement a little further and by doing so perhaps spoil his attitude.

"No, of course there's no 'must' about it," she agreed tranquilly. "But it would be jolly to go away together for a little while, wouldn't it?"

Frank hesitated. The truth was that he was in the middle of an experiment that was promising well. He was inclined to resent its interruption by a honeymoon out of London. Still, it would be interrupted in any case by his marriage. Perhaps it might be better to give way on this occasion. He asked Coral where she wanted to go.

"Oh, somewhere right away in the country."

Frank frowned.

"I'd rather go to the seaside if we're going anywhere."

He was determined to cross her over something; but she rather spoilt his self-assertiveness by declaring that she should enjoy the sea every bit as much.

"Very well, then," he said in a grim voice. "Margate."

"Margate?" she echoed doubtfully.

"Margate," he repeated.

"I was only thinking that the South Coast would be pleasanter so early in the year," she explained.

He admitted grudgingly that perhaps it would.

Coral

"I was thinking of Bournemouth," she told him.

"Well, all right," he agreed, greatly to her astonishment.

So it was decided that Coral should drive up to St. Bartholemew's, luggage and all, in her own taxi, and that the bridegroom should be waiting for her in the porch. When the service was over they were to drive to Waterloo in the same taxi which had brought her. It all sounded like being very extravagant; but Frank had gone from one extreme to the other, and he was now thoroughly in favour of doing things properly. The fact was that he had had a sudden fear that at the last minute Coral was going to back out, and his heart was so much set upon her, both for himself and for his revenge, that he resisted the temptation to rule her too strictly lest he should lose her.

On St. Mark's eve, which was her wedding eve, Coral walked for awhile in Brown Square and watched the young moon with Venus glittering in the dusky green of the April sky.

"Before I go indoors," she said to herself, "I must be quite sure of myself. I must not break down or do anything stupid. I'll walk once more round the Square, for I'm still feeling rather quavery."

But she was her grave and tranquil self when she went up to her room to dress for dinner. She was glad and sorry that nobody had proposed a theatre this evening—glad because she wanted to make the most of this last evening of her girlhood, sorry because the familiarity of these surroundings from which she was soon going to tear herself, perhaps finally, was at moments almost too poignant to be endured with the nonchalance she had to assume.

What would they all say when they learnt what she had done? Coral looked across the dining-table and

The World Well Lost

regarded her mother. Most of all how utterly unimaginable it would seem to her. It would be a shock to her father, but at least he would be able to realize what had happened. Whereas her mother would feel that she was going mad. Coral could hardly bear the indifference of the dining-room. She felt inclined to get up in her place and cry out that everybody in the room was walking on the edge of a precipice.

"You're looking very well, Coral," her mother was saying. "It really seems rather a pity you should be going down to Sussex when you're so very well in London. Besides, I suppose we shall all be going down to Wiltshire soon—I really cannot bring myself to call it Merryfield."

"The decorators hope to be out by the middle of May," her husband said. "I see no reason why we shouldn't be comfortably installed before the middle of June."

He looked at his daughter, thinking to himself how right he had been in the way he had handled that ridiculous business with his late chauffeur. Yes, he flattered himself that he had managed it all beautifully. Perfectly, and without the slightest fuss.

"Happy you're going down to Sussex?" he asked with a smile.

"Very happy."

All the same, Coral thought, everybody's unconsciousness of what she was going to do was overwhelming her. She went up early to bed to escape from it.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE MARRIAGE

As the day for the wedding had drawn nearer, Frank had been fretting himself with the fear lest when the actual moment arrived his bride should fail him. Coral had been aware of his anxiety, and when that night she went up to her room she half expected to find that he had again climbed up by the drainpipe in order to impress upon her for the last time that if she failed him to-morrow he would never forgive her. But he must have supposed that he had exhausted all his persuasions, for when she reached that rose-bloomed room it was as completely and intimately her own as it had been through all the years of her girlhood. There were only the three packed trunks to remind her of the morrow. Everything else was unchanged, for she had resolved not to carry with her into her new life any relics. The photographs of her girl friends, and of her men friends who danced well, were all in their places. She should leave them behind her just as willingly as she should leave the originals.

Coral pulled back the curtains and looked out of the window. It was a night of limpid starshine, unusually warm for the season of the year, and it might have tempted any maiden to pore upon it until the breaking of its lilac dawn. But Coral, once assured that Frank was not standing below, paid no more heed to it, and was soon as calmly asleep as if to-morrow she really were going no farther than Sussex. Nor did she wake till her blinds were full golden in the sunlight.

The Marriage

She had a passing qualm when her maid wrote out her labels for Sussex, and she had a shock when her father abruptly proposed that, since he had nothing to do that morning, he would drive her along to Victoria and see her off. She asked herself if he could possibly suspect her real destination; but she was half afraid to urge him not to come, lest by doing so she should confirm his suspicions.

"Oh, well, Maurice, if you haven't anything to do," her mother put in, "I do wish you'd come with me for once and look at the stuffs which that friend of mine has brought back with her from China. I'm so anxious to help her, poor dear, and as you said you intended to have one Chinese room in your new house, it seems an excellent opportunity for combining kindness with expediency."

How Coral hoped that her father's affection would not lead her into proposing that both he and her mother should see her off and visit the Chinese stuffs afterwards. With what relief she heard him say:

"Well, no doubt Coral can manage to put herself into the train without parental assistance."

"Of course she can," Mrs. Avery said a little sharply, for she always resented Maurice's fussing over his daughter in a way he never fussed over his wife. "Ellen can get her a taxi. By the way, I suppose that we shall soon be getting another chauffeur? It's more than a month now since Abel left."

"I've seen several, but none of them took my fancy," Maurice told her.

"Well, I liked Abel well enough. I can't think why he wanted to leave," Mrs. Avery said. "But servants are all alike nowadays. The better you treat them the quicker they turn round on you."

"Come along, come along, Constance. We'd better

Coral

get on if we're going to look at Chinese stuffs," Maurice said hurriedly.

Her mother's last speech stiffened Coral's back. She said good-bye to both parents without the tremor of a nerve or the least flutter of a pulse. Yes, as far as she was sentimentally concerned at that moment, they might have been setting out to China instead of visiting a shop in Kensington to look at Chinese stuffs.

It happened that the taxi which her maid found for Coral was driven by the grubbiest and most dilapidated old driver she had ever seen. He was so disagreeable, too, when she leant out of the window and told him to drive to Islington instead of to Victoria as he had been directed. He behaved as if an unpleasant practical joke had been played upon him.

"Where to?" he grumbled.

"St. Bartholomew's Church, Islington."

"And you don't want to go to Victoria at all?"

"No."

"It's a pity some people don't know what they do want. The servant-girl told me Victoria."

"She made a mistake. Are you going to drive me to Islington, or aren't you? Because, if you're not, I'll have to take another taxi."

"I never said nothing about not driving you to Islington, did I? What I said was it was a pity some people didn't know what they did want. That's what I said."

Whereupon, with a hideous jamming of all his gears which sounded as if a dog-fight was going on inside the engine, the grubby old man turned north.

Coral really could not help laughing when she looked at his red, honeycombed neck, and lank grey hair hanging over the dusty velvet collar of his shiny green coat, for was she not on her way to marry a taxi-driver? It really was rather a good joke that on this morning of

The Marriage

mornings, when she was romantically making her escape from convention, she should be driven by the most decayed old taxi-driver she had ever seen. And his cab was just like him.

"He'll never wait while we're being married," she thought. "What fun it will be to hear how Frank deals with a refractory fellow-driver."

But apparently Frank had no trouble in doing that, for the old taxi-driver did not indulge in a single mutter when he was told to wait outside the church. He might have been in the habit of waiting for young people to be married every day of his life.

In the quiet and shadowy church Coral felt, perhaps for the first time fully, into what an immense mystery she was plunging by her marriage. At all the weddings she had attended, whether as a bridesmaid or as a spectator, she had either been occupied by her own appearance or by the appearance of the bride. Weddings had been synonymous with heat and confusion and discomfort; but this hushed pause upon the threshold of the future was not a wedding. It was indeed a marriage.

"Heart of my heart," she whispered to Frank when they were driving to Waterloo, "we are one at last."

And he, in the pride that was his when he beheld this tall and fair and lovely girl beside him, forgot for awhile the unhappy past that he would avenge in this marriage, forgot everything but that they were man and wife, and caught her to him. On either side of the fusty and rickety old taxi the people and the traffic of London swirled past in an unregarded stream, for within the bride and bridegroom were lost in the rapture and sweet oblivion of their love.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE HONEYMOON

CORAL half wished that she had not suggested Bournemouth for their brief honeymoon, because the boarding-house was full of people spending their Easter holidays by the sea. The crowd of people would not have mattered so much if Frank had not got it into his head that they were regarding him from an altitude of superiority.

"Anybody 'ud think that old woman over there with the underdone face had never seen anybody crack an egg before. If she stares at me much longer, I'll pitch it across to her table so as she can see for herself if it's done right."

"Frank dear, it's not your egg she's looking at. It's you," Coral assured him.

"What's the matter with me, then?"

"My darling, nothing is the matter with you. That's why she's staring. If I were in her place I should stare to see anybody as good-looking as you among this depressing collection of frumps."

He could not help being appeased for the moment by his wife's flattery; but presently he began to grumble again.

"Well, don't tell me that the fellow over there with four chins and two noses is thinking how nice I am. Because he isn't. And if he chews his bacon in this direction much longer, I'll go and ask him what he wants."

"I can tell you," Coral said, laughing. "He wants to

The Honeymoon

look at me. He's not thinking anything about you or about your egg, beloved. His whole attention is concentrated upon your delightful wife."

"Well, look here," said Frank indignantly, "don't you encourage him, or you'll get my rag out. I'm a bit surprised at you, Coral."

"Darling, you must remember that the poor stuffy people in this boarding-house have never seen such an attractive pair as us. They're staring at us just as we should stare if we saw two golden sparrows on a London roof."

Luckily, however, as the weather kept fine, it was not necessary to expose themselves very much to the curiosity of their fellow-guests. Frank having been persuaded to condescend to a bicycle, they explored the watery-green levels round Christchurch and wandered about the breezy uplands of Swanage; but what Coral most enjoyed was taking their lunch to the Boscombe woods and spending the hours on the cliff's edge above the long sweep of almost deserted beach. There in the sweet young grass they would lie gazing up at a sky as richly blue as if it were already June. Behind them, in the dark background of pines and rhododendrons, the birds sang unceasingly, and, as if it were a faint echo of labouring towns and cities, they listened to the hammering of the woodpecker. There were turtle-doves, too, cooing all around them, and that elfin clown the cuckoo was mocking their amorous monody.

Then Coral would turn away from gazing at the sky and gaze, instead, at Frank, at his slimness and his red lips and deep slanting eyes. And he, when she leaned over to kiss him, would feel as if he were being buried in roses, while all that great expanse of sky at which he had been staring would be gathered up in Coral's azure eyes. Heart to heart they would lie, beating heart to beating

Coral

heart, while down below upon that lonely shore the waves broke with a sudden laugh and receded with a long-drawn sigh.

"You're not sorry that you married me?" she must ask.

"Are you sorry you married me?' would be more like it."

"You know I'm not. You know I'm not, my lover."

"Ah, but this is nothing. Where's the difference between the way we're living now and the way you've been accustomed to? Wait till we get back to Islington next Sunday night," he warned her.

"It won't change me," she vowed. "All the same, I'm glad we've stolen these few days from time. We shall always remember them. If things ever go a little badly for us, we shall always remember the sound of the sea here, and this soft grass, and the sky, and the birds singing in the woods, and the way we both looked at one another."

"Yes, but life isn't all going to be soft grass, you know," he said. "I won't always be lazing about like this."

"But, of course, that's what I'm reminding myself. It's only that I don't want you ever to forget these days, my darling."

"I'm not going to forget them; but I'm not going mooning around thinking of them all the time, because if I did we'd soon be nowhere. I've got a job of work to do in this world."

The truth was that Frank, in the enchantment of his bride's company, was beginning to wonder if after all he really was so anxious to avenge his mother through her. He disapproved of this weakness, and it was to check it that he was uttering these severe warnings to Coral.

The Honeymoon

They were really directed against himself. If Maurice Avery had offered Frank a hand at this moment, perhaps it might have been accepted, and the past might have been obliterated from his mind. Unfortunately, neither Maurice Avery nor his wife offered that hand.

CHAPTER XXX

PARENTAL LETTERS

CORAL had written to both her parents on the day of her marriage; to her friend in Sussex she had simply telegraphed that at the last moment she could not come and stay with her. It had been settled that Frank and she were to return to London by the last train on Sunday night. On the Saturday they went out early; riding deep into the Dorsetshire woodlands beyond Blandford, they did not reach Bournemouth till just before dinner-time.

Two letters were waiting for Coral—one from her father, one from her mother:

9, Little Queen Street,
Westminster.
April 27th.

Coral dear,

I do not suppose that it is necessary for me to tell you what a shock your letter was. I will leave that for your mother to tell you. But I think you ought to know how deeply you have wounded me by your behaviour. As for your husband, words fail me to say what I think of his conduct. He gave me a definite promise that he would think no more about you, and, as you know, he accepted from me a cheque for £100, which I gave him to express my appreciation of what I foolishly imagined was his decent and sensible attitude in the matter. I acquit you of persuading him into this rash and foolish match. I can only suppose that he deliberately threw himself once more in your path, how and where I

Parental Letters

cannot guess. I have little doubt that by now you are already bitterly regretting what you have done. I entreat you, if this be the case (and you will not misunderstand me when I say that I sincerely hope it is the case), not to stand upon any false pride with me. You and I have been dear and intimate friends for many years. You have been the chief joy of my life. Please, please, if you do regret what you have done, take me into your confidence. I do not expect to escape so lightly as I fondly thought I had escaped, but I am prepared to pay for my own credulity and carelessness as I deserve to pay, and I am ready to put up any sum that I can possibly afford if by so doing I can rescue you from what you must already be finding an intolerable situation. Even if for the time you cannot conquer your pride sufficiently to admit that you have made a mistake, let me beg you to have confidence in me. No doubt, if I were an ordinary father, I should tell you that you had made your bed and that you must lie on it. But I cannot help knowing that there does exist between you and me an affection that may not be measured by ordinary standards. For that reason I appeal to you to trust me. You need not have any fear of what your mother will say. Come back to me, my dear, and I will take you abroad for awhile with me. Any resentment I may have felt at your treatment of me will vanish if you come back and tell me that you have made a mistake and realize it. I would write to your husband, but I do not wish to make matters more difficult for you, and, of course, I know that you may still be deluding yourself with the fancy that you are happy. If that be so, you will tear this letter up and despise me for writing it. What I want you to believe is, my dear child, that if in a year from now, two years, any time, you find that you are unhappy, I will do all I can to help you. Meanwhile, I suppose it is better for us not to

Coral

meet. It would be impossible to receive your husband in this house, and I should not care to meet you surreptitiously.

I shall pay in to your account at whatever bank you ask me £100 a quarter. I hope you will find this useful. Oh, Coral, Coral, you've come very near to breaking my heart.

Your loving
Father.

Mrs. Avery wrote in a different strain :

Coral!

Your horrifying behaviour has nearly prostrated me! Your father tells me that he had a suspicion of what was going on. If he had, I can only say that he is nearly as much to blame as yourself. But you must be mad! Marrying your chauffeur! It's incredible! We have not told anybody yet, but of course it's only a matter of days. People have got to be told! I am going abroad. It's too ghastly! What would you have said if Lucius had married one of the maids? You would have been the first to hold up your hands in horror. But you have done far worse! And your slyness and deceitfulness! Where can you have inherited such a character? And you must have encouraged this unpleasant young man. He would never have had the impudence to propose to you unless you had made it perfectly obvious that you wanted him. If I said your conduct had been unladylike and unwomanly, I shouldn't be expressing half the disgust I feel. Why, it's scarcely human! Of course, I never did care for that school you went to. But your father would insist that it was a good school. Well, I've certainly finished with you. I was thoroughly looking forward to this season, and now I shall have to go and

Parental Letters

spend the whole summer abroad. And you know how much I dislike very hot weather! My daughter marries a servant! I'm glad your grandfather and grandmother are no longer alive, for it would certainly have killed them both. The shame of it!

*Your heartbroken
Mother.*

When Coral had read these two letters, she was going to tear them up, but Frank snatched them from her.

"Frank, give those letters to me. They're mine," she said angrily.

"If you think you're going to start in having letters all to yourself, you're mistaken," he replied. "We'd better have that quite clear before there's any mistake."

"Frank, please give me back those letters. They're from my father and mother."

"When I've read them, perhaps I'll give them back, or perhaps I'll answer them myself. Look here, if you're going to do your hair for dinner—and it's properly all over the place—you'd better start, because the gong's gone, and I don't want to come in late and give everybody the chance to stare at us when we walk past their table."

"Frank, once more I ask you to return me my letters."

"No, no, and once again, no," he shouted.

Coral turned pale.

"I'm beginning to think that perhaps my father is right," she said coldly.

Frank flung himself down on the bed and, without looking at her, read slowly through the letters. When he had finished, he put them into his pocket without a word of comment. Then he dipped his brush into the jug and plastered back his hair.

Coral

"Aren't you ready yet?" he demanded.

She followed him down to the dining-room as full of wrath as he was. All through dinner they sat in a rigid silence, and when the wretched meal was finished she said to him :

"Please give me back my letters, Frank. I want to answer them at once."

"I'll answer them," he said. "I'm going into the smoking-room."

Coral was afraid to argue with him in the hall of the boarding-house, for she did not know what Frank might say. She left him, and returned to their room.

Half an hour later Frank came up.

"Listen," he said. "This is what I've wrote to your father " :

Dear sir,

I will be much obliged if for the future you abstain from writing to my wife, Coral Abel, who is no longer your daughter because you do not know how to treat her as my wife. Any letters you send will be returned unopened, and she will not be allowed to touch the money if she was starving.

Yours truly,

Frank Abel.

CHAPTER XXXI

A MAN'S WORK

"You can't send a letter like that," Coral told her husband.

"Can't I?" he retorted. "Well, if you want to know, I've posted it already. This is only a copy."

"But what good do you think you have done by writing in that tone?"

"What good did your father and mother do by writing in that tone to you?" he countered.

"They wrote those letters to me—not to you. It was for me to answer them."

"I don't agree with you," said Frank. "Anybody who writes to you nowadays writes just as much to me. Or I think so. What's the good of you telling me all the time that nothing else in the world means anything to you except me, if you're going to be getting letters like that about me and then not showing them to me?"

Coral paused to consider this point of view, which, however clumsily expressed, was such a definite point of view that it might almost be said that the success of their life together in the future depended upon the attitude she took up towards it. Should she accept Frank's interpretation of marriage, or should she hold out for a measure of freedom that all intelligent people now admitted? But by marrying a man beneath her, as the world's standard went, she had married into an earlier outlook upon life. Opinions and dances lasted in the sort of society to which Frank was accustomed long after they had become obsolete in her own class. By marrying she must be prepared

Coral

to renounce twenty years of thought's advance. And, after all, why not, she thought in a sudden welling up of generous affection. For what else had she married Frank except to identify herself with him? If already she should begin to criticize him and allow his manners and methods, his whole point of view indeed, to grate upon her, what chance was she giving this marriage to be a success? It might be true that he had loved her, but it was also true that unless she had encouraged him he would never have dared to tell her of his feelings. She was primarily responsible for the marriage, and it was she who must be primarily responsible for its success. She put out her hand to Frank.

"I dare say it was best that you should write," she told him. "It's clear that until my father and mother have a change of heart there can be no communication of any kind between me and them. I should have written to them that, and in writing I might have made the breach irreparable. Yes, darling, it was better that you should write."

He took the hand she had offered to him and drew her into his arms, for he was proud of his first victory, and his pride made him feel tenderly toward her who had obliged him by letting herself be vanquished.

"I don't mind you writing to them as well as me if you want to," he said. "It was only I wanted your father to understand that he could not buy you from me, not for all the gold on earth."

"Because you love me so much?" she whispered, her cheek against his.

It was now Frank's turn to pause. This was surely the moment for complete candour. She had proved that she could sacrifice some of her pride in order to preserve the harmony of their life together. Should he not be acting more fairly if he were to tell her all the truth?

A Man's Work

But suppose she took it into her head that the only reason why he had married her was to avenge his mother's death upon the man who had indirectly been the cause of it? That might break up everything. She might leave him, in which case he should lose both his revenge and her. And he did not want to lose her.

"You know I love you," he replied.

Above the silence they could hear the drench of steady rain.

"It doesn't matter," she murmured. "We've had glorious weather ever since we were married. We can't expect it always to be fine."

"And, anyway, we're going home to-morrow," he reminded her.

"Oh, Frank, I feel so nervous at meeting your aunt. Suppose she hates me?"

"Well, if she hates you too much, we'll just clear off out of Dairymaids Row," he said consolingly.

"Yes, but that wouldn't compensate me for being hated by your only relation."

"Your relations hate me," he interposed.

"No, no, my dear, it's not you they hate. It's your position. But if your aunt hates me, she'll hate me for myself. And I do want her not to hate me. For one thing, I want her to teach me how to look after you properly. Oh, Frank, I'm afraid you'll find me so incompetent. You will be a little patient with me, won't you? You won't expect me to be a perfect cook and everything else all at once? I really am beginning to feel thoroughly nervous about myself."

Frank could not help being a little pleased to hear this. When he thought of his own upbringing and of the handicap, even heavier as it had turned out than he had ever imagined, of his birth, he told himself that he had already achieved a good deal in winning this wife of his—yes, and

Coral

winning her so completely for himself that it was she that felt nervous of her fitness to be his wife. There had been moments when the perfection of his apparatus for individual flight had seemed utterly unattainable. A few months ago he would have considered Coral even more unattainable. Yet now here she was in his arms, most indubitably his own. He had won her by himself. None had helped him. Every circumstance, indeed, had fought against his success. Well, having caught an angel for himself, he must make it his business now to give wings to humanity.

"You'll get on all right," he told Coral. "I shan't expect too much at first. And don't you worry about Aunt May. I say, Coral, if it's wet to-morrow I think I'll do a bit of work on paper. I've had one or two ideas come to me these last days."

"Frank, you will explain to me about your work, won't you?" she begged.

"I'm trying to invent an apparatus which anybody will be able to fit on to themselves and be able to fly."

"Yes, I've grasped that much."

"It's no use telling you any more till I've done it."

"Why not?"

"Well, because for one thing you might go talking about it, and, for another, you wouldn't understand unless you went in for mechanics."

"Why shouldn't I go in for mechanics?"

His eyes glittered with merriment as he gazed at her.

"I thought you were going in for keeping house. You get hold of how that's done, and perhaps by then I'll be able to show you how to fly."

Coral repressed the thought that Frank did not seem to appreciate what her enthusiasm might mean to his ambition, and on top of that she crushed the half-formed wish that he might learn from failure the value of her sympathy.

CHAPTER XXXII

MAY'S DISCOVERY

THE days that Frank was away on his honeymoon his aunt had spent cleaning up the little house in Dairymaids Row. Early on the Saturday evening she stopped and surveyed her handiwork.

"Well, she may be as stuck-up as she likes," she said to the picture of Jenny over the mantelpiece, "but she won't be able to say he's brought her ladyship to a dirty house." She went upstairs to take a final glance at the bridal chamber.

"I suppose Frank knew what he was doing when he brought back that picture. But it's not at all to my taste. Too big by half."

May would not have exaggerated if she had said that the portrait of King Edward VII was too big by much more than half, for it covered the greater part of one of the walls of the little room.

"But it's certainly like what he was," May thought, making the best of the portrait. "Very like. It must be funny being a king and having to wear medals all the time, the same as a commissioner."

This comparison suggested to her the commissioner in the entrance of the Rotunda Picture Theatre, and she decided that her hard work demanded some relaxation.

"There's really nothing more to do till they come back to-morrow afternoon," she assured herself, "and I'll only get the rats if I sit here moping to myself. It'll do me good to get a breath of air—even if the pictures is rotten."

Coral

Ten minutes later May turned out of Dairymaids Row and hurried along the crowded pavement towards the Rotunda. She arrived in the middle of a film, and was directed to a vacant seat by the electric torch of the attendant. In passing to it she walked over the toes of her prospective neighbour, who uttered a deep groan.

"I'm very sorry, I'm sure," said May, her confusion over her clumsiness making her voice sound as if it was she that was the injured party.

"Perhaps, now you've finished wiping your feet on my boots, miss, you'd like to hang your coat up on my nose?"

May collapsed into the vacant seat with a violent start.

"Good gracious alive!" she gasped. "Why, it's dad!"

"Who? What d'you mean?" the neighbouring voice demanded indignantly.

"Then you aren't dead?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon, miss, I thought you said 'dad.' But I ain't dead, either, if it comes to that, though I blooming soon shall be if many more of you featherweights use my feet for a level crossing."

May was silent. She could not argue with what after all might prove to be a perfect stranger that he was her own father. She must wait till the lights went up at the end of this picture. But she could not have made a mistake. It must be dad. The lights went up at last, and, turning to look at the owner of the voice, she beheld a small man with snow-white hair and a wrinkled, humorous face.

"I knew it was you," she exclaimed. "Well, fancy meeting you again here after all these years!"

Charlie Raeburn gazed at his daughter.

"It's me all right. But where have you been, then?"

May's Discovery

I got a postcard from you about twenty years ago, and that's the last I heard of you."

"My goodness, haven't you got old, dad!" his daughter ejaculated.

"Well, you wouldn't expect me to get young, would you?" the old man retorted indignantly. "You're a bit older yourself than when you was in your cradle, if it comes to that, my girl."

At this moment the lights went out again, and a film like thousands of others began to tick its dreary course.

"Well, there's no sense in sitting talking here," said Charlie. "Let's go round the corner and have one."

"But I've only just come in," May objected. "Wait a minute or two. I'll look so funny getting right up and going out."

"Anyone 'ud think to hear you," said Charlie, "as you found your father every blessed night of the week. Come on, I want to hear a bit of news. One postcard in twenty years don't tell anybody much."

"This picture don't look as if it was going to be very interesting," said May doubtfully. "What was the last one like?"

"How do I know what it was like?" her father replied. "I didn't come in here to look at pictures. I came in here to have a jolly good sleep, and which I would have done if I'd have lost my legs in a railway accident so as they didn't get trod on all the time."

"What do you want to come and sleep in a picture theatre for?" his daughter asked.

"Because my missus won't let me sleep at home."

"What? You've *never* been and got married again?" she cried.

"Haven't I? I have then. I reckon I'm more married now than I ever was."

"Oh, dad, you are silly."

Coral

"Yes, that's what I've told myself more than once," Charlie agreed. "Look here, are you coming round the corner to have one, or aren't you? Because I haven't got the whole night before me. At least, I haven't, not if I want to spend a quiet Sunday morning in bed."

May could not help wishing that she had met her father outside the Rotunda before wasting her money on going inside for scarcely ten minutes. However, she consented to accompany him.

"I suppose you don't remember the old Arms at the corner of Hagworth Street where you was born?" Charlie inquired when they were debating on the pavement what public-house to patronize.

"Of course I remember it," May replied. "Would you like to go there now?"

"I'd like to go very much if it hadn't have been pulled down these ten years or more."

"Fancy! I never noticed," she said. "They've cut down the tree at the corner."

"Tree!" Charlie scoffed. "Anyone 'ud think to hear you talk as if cutting down a tree and pulling down a pub was the same thing. Well, they can say what they like, but there'll never be another pub like the old Masonic Arms, not in my time there won't. Always just a little bit over the measure. No stinting—that's what I liked about it. Well, it was the governor's orders—old Tom Cheshire, that was. Yes, poor old Tom. His end was very sad. Very sad it was. He was going round the brewery one afternoon by special invitation from the owners, and he turned round to say something sudden, tripped, and fell into the vat. He wasn't drowned, but the shock brought on something with a name I can't remember. Anyway, he swelled up like a balloon and burst in the night. He had the finest funeral I ever saw. What

May's Discovery

with that and the doctors it must have cost his wife a rare lot. . . ."

"Look here, dad," May interrupted, "you could have talked like this inside."

"Now don't get snappy. It does me good to talk a bit. I don't often get a chance nowadays. Ah, don't you never marry again, my girl."

"Thanks, I haven't married once yet," May said tartly.

"Well, don't. You stay as you are. Marriage is a lottery, you'll hear them say. Well, I once knew a fellow who did win ten pounds in a lottery, but I never heard of anybody who ever won anything in marriage. If you ask me, marriage is a broken penny-in-the-slot machine. That's what marriage is."

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE GRANDFATHER

IN the saloon bar of the King's Head, Charlie listened with many grave nods to the tale of his daughter's life since she and Jenny went away to Cornwall and left him on the platform of Paddington Station all those years ago. When it was finished he clicked his tongue portentously.

"Well, of course I always told your mother as it was very lucky she'd married a joiner and not a gunsmith. And, mind you, Jenny had a sharper tongue even than what your mother had. Still, it's passing a bit beyond a joke to really go and shoot anyone. But you might have told your poor old dad where you was. Of course, I read all about it in the papers, but I never let on to the chaps down at the shop as I'd got anything to do with any of the parties concerned. Well, I'd have had my picture in the papers before I knew where I was, and that would have been a nice disgrace."

"It's a funny thing we never met again somewhere like this," May said, changing the subject to avoid talking about Jenny.

"Ah, but I didn't stay on long at Hagworth Street. Oh no, I moved down to lodgings in Camden Town when you and Jenny went away. I only come up to Islington to-night for old sake's sake and to get a bit of a rest from your mother-in-law—no, wait a bit, that's wrong—your step-mother I *should* say. You ought to meet *her*, my girl. You'd better come round some afternoon when we've got winkles for tea and she's a bit

The Grandfather

occupied picking them out. Then you'll be able to hear yourself speak. Yes, or you might think you'd made a mistake and gone to a football match instead of going out to tea with your poor old dad. The way her tongue wags! Well, I never see a dog wag his tail so fast as what she wags her tongue."

"What did you want to marry her for?" May asked scornfully.

"How could I help it? Why, the woman had had three husbands already. Oh yes, she knew how it was done, my girl. She'd kept husbands the same as anybody else might keep rabbits."

"Well, I think people is mad to marry in our family," May declared. "It always seems to bring unhappiness."

And she told him about Frank and his marriage, though she did not say whose daughter Coral was; not that her father would have remembered about Maurice Avery.

"Let me see, this Frank you're talking about, he'd be my grandson, wouldn't he?"

"Of course."

"No of course about it. I've got to get used to the idea. Cor bless us!" he exclaimed in sudden consternation, gulping down the rest of his whisky.

"What's the matter now?"

"Why, I've just been thinking. I'll be a great-grandfather before I know where I am. Yes, a great-grandfather," he added bitterly. "And yet if I'm back home two minutes after my usual time I get talked to as if I was a infant in arms. Nice thing if a great-grandfather can't go round the corner and have one without holding up his hand like a kid who wants to leave the room in a Sunday-school class. But fancy this young Frank going and marrying his governor's daughter! I

Coral

suppose she'll be too proud to know her poor old grandpa, because, of course, I'm as much her grandfather as what I am his, in a manner of speaking."

"You can find out for yourself to-morrow evening if you come round to Dairymaids Row, because they'll be back from Bournemouth then."

May doubted the wisdom of this invitation as soon as she had given it, for perhaps Frank would be angry. She had been thinking that the presence of her father would help to tide over the first awkwardness of meeting Frank's bride, but it might only make matters worse. And she thoroughly repented her hospitality when her father went on:

"What's more, I'll bring the missus with me. We'll have a regular family gathering. She's got a lot of relations through her being married three times. It's a bit confusing for me sometimes. She started off as Miss Brown. Then she become Mrs. Blowing. Then she become *Mrs.* Brown. Then she was Mrs. Grizzard. And now, of course, she's Mrs. Raeburn, more's the pity. Well, I expect she'll bring an assortment from each family, and we'll have a nice homely evening. Of course, I don't sing nowadays."

"Oh, you don't?"

"Oh, no! No, I gave up my singing when wireless come in."

They parted soon after this to let May do some feverish marketing in preparation for the tea-party.

When she woke up on Sunday morning she could not imagine what had possessed her to invite her father to Dairymaids Row. But nothing could be done to stop his coming, for she had forgotten to find out where he was living. She might go down to Waterloo and meet the Bournemouth train so that she could warn Frank. Then if her father and his wife came there would be nobody to

The Grandfather

let them in. But suppose they waited on the doorstep? That would be worse than ever.

"I don't know how ever I could have been so mad," she cried, and in despair she started to clean out the little house for the twentieth time since Frank had told her he was going to bring his bride to Dairymaids Row.

CHAPTER XXXIV

HOME

"HOME this afternoon," Frank said to Coral on that Sunday morning when his aunt was on her knees with a scrubbing-brush trying to scrub away the thoughts of the party she had evoked to welcome him. "Tired of your honeymoon?"

"Such a tiny little honeymoon," she said. "We'll have another, I think, don't you?"

"We might get away for a bit later in the year. Say August. Not before, because this is the season for money-making with a taxi. Besides, I've got my work to think about."

They spent the first part of the morning, which was one of alternating silver showers and bright hot sunshine, in wandering about the pleasant cliffs of Bournemouth; but toward noon the sky clouded over completely, and their last day turned into a drench of unrelenting rain. They went back to the boarding-house and finished their packing. The wet Sunday atmosphere became oppressive, and after lunch Frank suggested that they should take an earlier train up to London.

"It won't be so crowded as what it will be in the evening, and, besides, it'll be a nice surprise for Auntie if we get back in good time for tea."

On the platform at Waterloo, which they reached about half-past four, Frank surveyed his wife's luggage critically.

"I suppose we might as well take a taxi as try to get

all that stuff of yours by Tube. It's a shocking waste of money, though, isn't it?"

Coral laughed.

"Oh, Frank, what an unprofessional remark for a taxi-driver to make!"

"Well, so it is. I often think to myself when people take my taxi for three or four hundred yards: 'Yes, you ought to have to earn your living the same as what I have. You wouldn't be hopping in and out of taxis all day long.'"

"Taxi, miss?" inquired the porter in attendance.

Frank glared at him angrily.

"Yes," he said as sternly as he knew how; and then, feeling that even so he had not asserted himself enough, he added: "And be quick about it. We don't want to be kept hanging about here all night."

"Frank, you shouldn't have spoken to the porter like that," Coral told him. "He was being perfectly obliging."

"I dare say he was to you," said Frank, flushing darkly. "But you don't think *I* was going to stand his sauce. Thanks, I know when anybody's trying to score off me, and they don't usually do it twice."

Coral was cross with herself for not realizing why Frank had spoken like that to the porter, and she made a resolution always to remember that for a long time to come he was bound to be unduly sensitive to the least suggestion that he was being ignored or slighted.

When the taxi arrived and the driver perceived who had engaged him, he saluted his fare with a broad grin.

"What cheer, Frank! Wherever have you come from?"

"Why, hullo, Dick," muttered the fare in some embarrassment.

"Oh, what fun!" Coral cried. "Is our driver a friend of yours? Do introduce him to me."

Coral

Frank looked at her sharply to see if she was laughing at him, but finding that apparently she was not, he turned to the driver :

"I've just come back from Bournemouth. Well, as a matter of fact, I've been getting married. This is my missus."

"Pleased to meet you," said the driver, offering Coral his hand.

"Well, are you going to drive us to Islington, Dick?"

"What do *you* think?" he answered. "As soon as you like. Jump in."

Owing to the cab's not being able to drive up to the door of number three, Frank had to call upon his friend, who he told Coral worked for the same owner as himself, to help him carry the luggage to Dairymaids Row.

"You've chosen a nice quiet corner for your little nest," said Dick admiringly.

"Come in and see us some time," Frank invited him. "You won't find us anything but quiet; but the missus 'll give you a cup of tea, won't you?"

"Why, with pleasure any time, Mr. . . ." She hesitated.

"Tyler's my name," he said. "But Dick 'll do to go on with."

Inside number three May had been watching with apprehension the arrival of her niece's luggage; but she now made a tremendous effort, opened the front door, and in a voice that she hoped did not sound very quavery said :

"Well, you have arrived. I didn't expect you quite so soon."

Coral hurried across the pavement to bend down and kiss this little aunt, who seemed to her like some queer fairy guarding the entrance of the new world into which she was entering.

"We've had such a lovely time at Bournemouth, Aunt May."

"Did you? I'm glad it was nice. I went to the pictures myself last night."

As she said this, May threw nervous glances to both ends of Dairymaids Row, but to her relief there was as yet no sign of her father's arrival. After polite farewells to Dick Tyler, who declined Frank's invitation to come in and have a cup of tea right away, they all went into the house.

Coral admired everything very much, even the immense portrait of King Edward that dominated her bedroom.

"I'm glad you like it," May said. "I can't get used to it, I can't. Every time I've come to do a bit of dusting, it's given me a regular turn. 'Oo-er,' I've said more than once. 'Whoever is it?'"

"Nice and quiet here, isn't it, Coral?" said Frank when they were all sitting round the fire in the little front room. "And it's not just quiet because it's Sunday. It's just as quiet as this every day of the week. Well, we don't get any traffic through the Row, that's why."

At this moment there was first a ring at the bell, then a loud knock at the door, and finally a rataplan upon the window.

"Good heavens, who on earth's that?" exclaimed Frank, turning round to see a cheerful old face beaming in at him over the railings. "Here, what's he trying to sell? Muffins?"

May put a hand to her heart and said in a faint voice:

"I think it must be dad come round to wish you happiness."

"Dad?" exclaimed her nephew, who, having no suspicion of his grandfather's existence, thought his aunt had gone mad with the worry of Coral's arrival.

Coral

"It's my father, Frank," she said. "I found him last night at the Pictures, and, without thinking you might be feeling a bit tired, I asked him to come in and have tea with us."

Frank could almost have strangled his aunt for showing him up like this before Coral. What would she think of somebody who was entirely ignorant of his grandfather's existence? It would be useless to pretend that he had known him, because the old man himself was bound to give the situation away.

"Well, you'd better go and let him in," he said sullenly to his aunt, who had gone to the window instead of to the door.

"I think he's brought his wife with him and one or two friends or relations of hers," said May. She sounded, as indeed she was, on the verge of tears.

"Why, what fun!" Coral exclaimed.

May looked at her gratefully, and could Frank but have got rid of his self-consciousness there might have been created in that instant a truly happy family at number three Dairymaids Row. But he sat nursing the wound to his vanity.

The rataplan on the window began again.

"Come on," they heard the voice of Charlie Raeburn calling outside. "The animals is all waiting to come into the Ark. Get on with it, Mrs. Noah, and open the door."

There were mingled exclamations of merriment and disapproval on the doorstep.

"Go on, auntie, you'll have to let them in," said Frank gloomily. "But if I'd have known you were going to spring this on us I wouldn't have come back till to-morrow."

"Well, I think it was a very nice idea of Aunt May's to have all the relations at once," said Coral.

"Very likely, if it was relations I'd ever heard of.

But I don't know any more about them than what you do," Frank replied.

"Well, and no more don't I," put in May.

"Hi! Come on! Open the door and let us in," came the voice of Charlie again. "What are you having a game at? Hide the thimble or Dumb Crambo?"

May hurried from the room.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE FAMILY PARTY

THE invaders were headed by Charlie, who, in the dignity conferred upon him by his relationship to the bride and bridegroom, was granted a sort of precedence by his wife for the first and probably the last time during their married existence. The second Mrs. Raeburn was a tall, mottled woman of about sixty, with a hirsute chin, and no trace whatever of voluptuous attraction, or indeed of any kind of attraction that might have made imaginable her conquest (or should one say defeat?) of four husbands. Her voice was so harsh and domineering that whenever she spoke she drowned all the conversation ruthlessly; and since her desire to talk was stimulated by the sound of other people's voices her presence in a room was usually as disastrous as would have been the presence of a steam-saw. On this occasion she was so much impressed by the sudden acquisition of a step-daughter, a step-grandson, and a step-granddaughter-in-law that she was comparatively quiet. These meticulous relations of hers to May, Frank, and Coral had been worked out by her eldest son, Mr. George Blowing, who she considered was her chief contribution to the reunion. Mr. Blowing was a walrus-faced man with a deep and melancholy voice, who having several years ago won a competition in some paper had enjoyed a reputation for wisdom ever since. Mr. Blowing had perhaps inherited from his father a dread of matrimony, for he was un-

The Family Party

married and lived in Kentish Town with his sister, Mrs. Gunyon, a round-faced woman with cheeks of the texture and colour of the outside of a suet pudding, the internal jam of which had burst out to provide a comparison for her mouth. Mrs. Gunyon had come without her husband, who was not considered by Mr. George Blowing's calculations closely enough related to assist *ex officio* at the gathering. She had, however, brought her children, Norman and Phyllis, who looked like two bits broken off the same suet pudding. Mrs. Raeburn's alliance with Mr. Brown had presumably been unblest with offspring. At any rate, if it had been, there was none of them available this afternoon. There were, however, two young Grizzards in the mid-twenties, Joe and Bert, each of whom had a mottled face like his mother's, and a big Adam's apple that bobbed up and down like an angler's float. Their sister, a Mrs. Molling, with a much beshawled baby, two clinging children, and a rather frightened-looking young husband completed the party.

"So this is Jenny's boy?" said the proud grandfather, patting Frank on the back. "Well, it's a fact I never wouldn't have known you, you know. Not if I'd bumped into you walking along the street."

"Don't talk so scatterbrained and anyhow, Charles Raeburn," his wife rasped.

"No more I wouldn't have known him, then," Charlie insisted. "Well, if it takes a wise father to know his own child, it'll take something a good bit wiser in the way of grandfathers to know. . . ."

"I wonder you care to talk so silly and vulgar in front of people, even though we are all a family party. How d'ye do? I'm sure this is quite an unexpected treat."

This greeting was addressed to Coral, who shook hands and said she was very glad to meet her.

"Well, now, I think that's very nice," declared Mrs.

Coral

Raeburn. "Very nice indeed, I think that is. And I'm sure I'm extra-emely glad to meet you . . ." she hesitated.

"Coral," said the owner of the name. "Please call me Coral."

"Well, fancy! Coral! Now there is a sweetly pretty name," Mrs. Raeburn declared, and turning to her youngest daughter she added: "What a pity, Maudie, you hadn't have thought of that before you christened dear little Millie there. Coral!" she went on, sucking a tooth appreciatively. "Well, I don't remember whenever I heard a prettier name. And so nice and uncommon. Not at all a name you'd hear shouted from one end of a bus to another."

"Well, I don't like the name," said Charlie. "I like the young lady, yes. She's quite all right. But her name's rotten. Well, for one thing, I don't call it a name at all. Why, you might as well call anyone Bone or Marble—or Plaster of Paris if it comes to that."

"I never did, not in all my life, ever know a man as old as you talk so thoughtless and silly," said his wife severely.

"No, my dear, you never knew anyone so *old* as me before. They wasn't as tough as what I am. What? I reckon my name ought to have been Ingerrubber. Yes, Ingerrubber Raeburn. And Ber for short."

This sally produced an explosive laugh from Bert Grizzard.

"Thanks for those few kind words, young feller," said Charles. "Only be careful you don't swaller yourself, laughing too hearty."

Mrs. Raeburn tossed her head.

"I sometimes wonder, I do, how anybody can *be* so vulgar," she answered.

"Dad was always one for making a joke," May explained.

The Family Party

"Oh, a joke, yes. I've nothing against a good joke," said Mrs. Raeburn. "But I hate and abominate vulgarity. Why, even at Christmas time when people often lets themselves go a little too far and nobody doesn't say nothing to them just because it is Christmas, I'll always put my foot down against vulgarity."

All this time Frank had been biting his lips and raging against these infernal people who, by his aunt's folly, had invaded his life at the very moment when he could tolerate them less easily than ever before. Coral was being outwardly gracious enough, but how she must be laughing at them in her heart, and perhaps even at him. He looked across to where she was listening in that grave and tranquil way of hers to Mr. George Blowing's account of the intellectual feats he had to accomplish before being adjudicated the winner of that competition which had made his name resound. The humiliation of it was horrible. And then worse than anything that had already happened he heard his grandfather's voice break in upon the tale of the competition.

"You two talking of Buried Railway Stations puts me in mind that the biggest puzzle I ever had in my life was how to write Trewhella."

"How to write what?" Coral asked.

"Cor bless the girl," Charlie exclaimed, "it's as much of a mystery to her as what it was to me. Don't you find it a bit awkward sometimes not being able to spell your own name?"

"Yes, but I am Abel," she laughed.

"Go on, then, spell it," Charlie challenged.

"Look here, aren't we going to have our tea?" Frank interrupted in the hope of averting the calamity.

But Coral was determined to be entertained by what she supposed was a game of her grandfather's.

"A-B-E-L," she spelt.

Coral

"What?" Charlie cried. "Well, if you aren't much worse at it than what I was. Oh, dear, oh, dear! It's chronic. Marries a fellow called Trehwella—why, that's poytry. Hi! Mrs. Raeburn, you've married a blooming poyt.

There was a young feller,
And his name was Frank Trehwella;
So his little wife whose name wasn't Mabel
Went and spelt it A-B-E-L.

I'll be gingered if I knew I was a poyt before. Well, I'm glad I found it out before I got both feet in the coffin. I think I'll get a job writing motters for crackers."

"I think you'll make a splendid poet, grandfather," said Coral.

"Oh, call me grandpa, my dear. Don't call me grandfather. It sounds like a funny turn."

"Yes, a splendid poet," she went on. "But who is Frank Trehwella?"

"Who's . . . who's who?" he gasped. "Why, Frank Trehwella, your husband. I know it's an unnatural name, but you might get a bit nearer to it than Abel."

"You know, I don't understand this joke a bit," Coral said in bewilderment.

"No, nor anybody else," Frank interposed angrily.

"Can't you behave yourself for one afternoon, Charles Raeburn," his wife demanded, "without passing a lot of personal remarks? I'm disgusted at you."

"Where's the joke in asking anybody how they spell their name? However, as it don't seem a very popular question, I'll say no more about it."

On this May came to say that tea was ready, and Coral decided to wait until the guests were all gone before she tried to solve the mystery of Frank's name.

CHAPTER XXXVI

NAMES

THE welcome that their new relations felt bound to accord them began to seem endless to the bride and bridegroom, who were both tired out when about eleven o'clock the little house was quiet again. The last half-hour had been particularly arduous, because Mr. Blowing would invite everybody to solve puzzles such as changing fifteen squares into three by removing three matches. It would not have been so tiring; if he had not insisted on their all trying, while he himself sat puffing a large pipe and watching with a compassionate smile their geometrical contortions.

"If I go fiddling about with these matches much longer," said Charlie, "I'll think I've got the rats."

"Can you do this one?" was Mr. Blowing's inexorable response, upon which he would lay out one more complicated pattern and challenge the company to change it into another equally complicated, either by never moving more than one match at a time or always more than three.

"Well, really," said Mrs. Raeburn at last, "I do think we ought to be saying good night."

"So do I," her husband agreed, "unless you want to drop me at Colney Hatch on the way home. Good night all, and thank you very much, my dear, for a very nice, pleasant, comfortable evening until George begun with them blessed matches."

When they were in their room, Coral asked Frank to explain the joke about his name.

Coral

"There's no joke," he declared. "It was only that old fool trying to be funny."

"But, Frank, he evidently thought that your name was Trewhella," Coral insisted.

"Well, I can't help that, can I? I tell you I didn't know he existed before this evening. Aunt May never spoke to me about having a father. She may have mentioned him, but I always supposed he was dead."

"What was your own father? I've never asked you."

"You needn't think I'm going to find *my* father all of a sudden," said Frank bitterly. "He's dead, right enough. There's no fear about that."

"Frank, I'm not just being inquisitive. You must realize that I am interested in anything and everybody that has to do with you. And I want to know about your mother. Aunt May was so funny just now when I asked her if that photograph over the mantelpiece was like her."

"My mother died when I was about two," he said. "So did my father. My mother was on the stage and my father was a farmer. There, now you know as much about them as what I do."

"But, Frank, *is* your name Trewhella? For, you know, I'd sooner be Coral Trewhella than Coral Abel."

She could have bitten out her tongue as soon as she said this, because Frank went white with anger.

"I thought it wouldn't be long before you regretted you ever married me," he said. "I knew as soon as you saw Dairymaids Row you'd think you'd made a big mistake. I dare say you *would* sooner be Coral Trewhella than Coral Abel. I dare say you'd sooner be Coral Anything sooner than Coral Abel. But you're Coral Abel now, and you may as well make the best of it, for you'll stay Coral Abel as long as I live."

"Frank, there's no need to get excited. I didn't in

the least mean what you think, though I don't believe that you do really think it. I did wonder if perhaps for some reason you had taken another name."

"Why should I take another name? Do you think I've been in jail?"

"No, no, my dear, of course I don't. But sometimes when people go in the Army they change their names. I'm sure they do—and really I was only teasing you when I said I liked Coral Trewhella better than Coral Abel. Don't let that begin a foolish misunderstanding between you and me. I'm not in the least disappointed in Dairy-maids Row. Really, I'm not. It's far nicer than I thought it would be. And I love our little room, my dear. Such a precious little room belonging entirely to you and me. And I love all the things you've bought for it. I even love King Edward VII, and if he weren't hanging up there I should feel quite lonely without him already."

She put out a hand to draw him to her, but Frank pushed it away.

"Oh, well, if you won't be generous," she said coldly, "I'll have to learn manners, won't I?"

"Meaning, I suppose, that I've got no manners," said Frank. "Well, I never pretended to have any."

They turned from each other in silence.

Coral lay awake for hours in the darkness, until at last she could stand its oppression no longer and struck a match. The countenance of King Edward was faintly mobile in the wavering illumination, and seemed to be regarding her with benevolence; but Frank lying beside her fast asleep did not stir. The match burnt itself out, and the darkness pressed upon her more thickly than before. Could Frank really have fallen so fast asleep without minding? She whispered his name very softly, but there was no response by movement or by word.

"I ought not to have sneered at his lack of generosity,"

Coral

she told herself reproachfully. "That was ungenerous of me. Poor boy, he was upset by all those absurd people. He had been so anxious that I shouldn't be horrified by Dairymaids Row. Everything went wrong for him. And even if he did change his name, I expect he thought he ought to have told me and was upset because he hadn't. After all, I did not marry him for his name, but for himself. He's still feeling so self-conscious, poor darling. I must remember that. It will rest entirely with me to make our marriage a triumphant success. Even if he snubs me again, I must wake him and tell him I'm sorry. I must remember that he isn't meaning to snub me, or be ungracious, or unsporting. Everything's so much easier for me."

Coral put out her hand and lightly stroked her husband's forehead. He stirred, murmuring in his sleep.

"Darling," she called.

"What is it? What is it?" he exclaimed, sitting up, suddenly awake.

"Only 'darling,'" Coral said. "Only you, dear cross-patch. That's all I was calling. Frank, I'm sorry I was so tactless. Forgive me, please. Don't let's wait till morning to make it up; because if we do, all this night may stretch between us for the rest of our lives like a black dividing stream."

Frank himself had not fallen asleep quite so easily as Coral had supposed. For a long time his brain was like an infernal kaleidoscope as one after another the various humiliations and apprehensions of the day presented themselves in hideous shifting patterns. There had come a moment when he was on the verge of telling Coral all about his father and his mother, and about her father. His pride was deserting him in the darkness; his fine projects of revenge were beginning to seem of infinitely small account. He did at that moment put out a hand to

Coral, but fate ruled that for one fleeting instant fatigue should have made her unconscious. When she did not respond, Frank withdrew in mortification. Defiance took the place of pride ; and now added to his determination to avenge his mother's death upon Coral's father there was begotten an impulse to make her so utterly dependent upon himself that never again should any railway porter inquire her will when her husband was present. It was upon this resolution that Frank fell asleep, and it was from this resolution that Coral woke him with her appeal.

"There's nothing to make up," he said, and as he took her to him she felt as she had felt when first she drove beside him in the car. While she lay clasped in his arms that were at once coldly and ruthlessly devoid of emotion, yet fierce with a vitality that transcended emotion, she could have fancied that she was loved by some creature of the far future whose humanity had been merged so completely as almost to be lost altogether in mechanical perfection.

CHAPTER XXXVII

WORK

FRANK had fitted himself up a workshop in the little backyard of Dairymaids Row. There was something symbolical in this small shed in which he laboured at solving the problem of individual flight, overshadowed as it was by the towering walls of huge warehouses that tried to forbid man even to behold the skies, still less to dream of attaining their freedom.

Here Frank spent nearly all his time when he was not out with his taxi. It was natural that Coral in these first days of their life together should feel a little jealous of this workshop, and she candidly admitted to herself that it was mostly jealousy which made her less sympathetic with his endlessly patient labour out there than she knew she ought to be. Partly it was Frank's own fault, because, if ever she did make an attempt to take a practical interest in what he was doing by offering to pass him this or that tool, or fetch this or that bit of wood, he always told her that it was quicker for him to get what he wanted for himself than to interrupt his calculations by explaining to her what he wanted, still less why he wanted it, which sometimes in an excess of enthusiastic interest she would demand.

"The best thing for you to do if you're so anxious to be a help is to learn something about looking after a man's house for him," he advised her.

"Yes; but, Frank, you must understand that I have

to be very careful not to offend Aunt May. You can't expect her to surrender the whole of the housekeeping to me right off. She did offer to, but I couldn't help seeing how glad she was when I refused."

"You oughtn't to have refused. I shall tell her you've got to do it," he said.

"But I shall do it so badly," Coral protested.

"I expect you will. But you'll never learn anything just by standing by and looking on at other people doing things."

"Frank, I do make your tea in the morning."

He laughed unkindly.

"Why are you laughing?" she asked in a voice perplexed and hurt.

"Well, it's such funny tea!"

"It's splendid tea," she said indignantly. "I went and chose it for you specially. It's the best I could get, and it cost a lot. But, of course," she added quickly, "I paid for it with my own money."

"It's just as silly to waste your own money as to waste mine. Yours won't last for ever, and I'm not going to let you have a halfpenny from your father."

"Am I in your way while you're working?" Coral asked to change the subject, for she did not want to talk about her father.

"Well, you are a bit," he said.

Yes, it was natural that she should feel a little jealous of that workshop and think its influence on Frank was unpleasant. He never encouraged her by saying that he was getting on well. The invention at which he was toiling was apparently still in the purely experimental stage, the gratification of his ambition as remote as ever.

Then one day old Charles Raeburn came round to see them, unaccompanied by his family. Coral liked the old

Coral

man and enjoyed his limitless capacity for seeing the humorous side of everything. At Frank's request his daughter had explained to him about the change of name and impressed upon him the importance of not saying anything to Coral about the past, so that his occasional visits were not discouraged. On this occasion he inquired after his grandson, and was informed that he was working.

"Working? What out with his taxi?"

"No; working in his workshop in the yard," Coral explained.

"But it's half-past seven, my girl."

"Yes; but he often works till midnight."

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear! Well, he must have got that from his grandmother. My first wife, that is. Nothing pleased her better than to start in turning the house upside down just when I wanted to go to bed. Oh, it was chronic sometimes. You know, I've gone upstairs feeling I could just do with a jolly good lay down and found the room looking like a furniture auction in the Caledonian Market. But what's Frank working at?"

"Why, he's got this invention for flying."

"You don't mean to tell me he's making an aeroplane in your backyard? He'll go breaking everybody's windows down the street, that's what he'll do."

"No, it's not an aeroplane. It's an invention for everybody to fly. If he's successful, you and I will be able to put on a pair of wings and fly anywhere we want."

"But I don't want to fly," Charlie protested. "No, and, what's more, I don't want to see a lot of other people flying around. Why, I've never heard of anything so blooming silly in all my life. I *can* hop on a bus now and get away from the second Mrs. Raeburn. But you fit her up with wings, and she'll be after me like a bluebottle

after a bit of beef. The boy's barmy. Here, I'll go and tell him not to be so stupid."

"Oh, no, please, grandpapa, don't go and disturb him."

"Oh, but I am going to disturb him."

And followed by Coral the old man went out to remonstrate with his grandson.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

SHARP TONGUES

IN spite of the gold of the rich June eve the surrounding warehouses had already thrown Frank's workshop into shadow, so that when his grandfather came in he was working by the light of an acetylene lamp. He looked up angrily at the interruption with an extra frown for Coral.

"Grandpapa wanted to see your workshop," she explained.

"That's right," said Charlie. "I wanted to see what you're up to, working at this unnatural hour. Well, it ain't a bad little shop. Not at all a bad little shop, it ain't. But what are all them bottles?"

"Chemicals," said Frank curtly. "What did you think they were? Whisky?"

"Now, don't pick me up so sharp, my boy. I may not be the handsomest man in England, but I've still got a nose, and not even the whisky at the Three Unicorns, Camden Town, ever smelt like that. Chemicals, eh? You know you young fellows take too much medsing nowadays. I used to. I was always dosing myself when I was younger, but I give it up before it killed me, and look at me now. Seventy-six, my boy, last birthday."

"Chemicals don't necessarily mean medicine," Frank said contemptuously.

"Of course, they don't. They very often mean milk. We had some milk last week that looked like boat-race day. Blue? Why, you could have enamelled a wash-stand with it. Well, I said to the milkman next time I

Sharp Tongues

saw him : ' Look here,' I said, ' Milk-oh, whatever have you been feeding your cows on? Forget-me-nots? ' "

"If it's all the same to you, grandpa, I want to get on with my work," Frank said.

"Ah, but it isn't all the same to me, my boy. That's what I've come to talk to you about. What's all this about you inventing something as will let everybody go flying? Don't you do it, my boy. You listen to me, and don't you do it. You'll have plenty of time for flying when you go to Heaven; and there'll be a bit more room there. People is a bit bigger than sparrows, you know. I don't want to go walking quietly along a street and have some great clumsy lout wiping his dirty boots on my head as he flies past."

"Look here," said Frank, his eyes blazing. "I'll thank you to keep your tongue quiet about me and my inventions. And the sooner you get out of my workshop the better I'll be pleased."

"Come along, come along," Coral begged. "He's busy, and we oughtn't to have interrupted him."

"No," said Frank, looking at his wife resentfully, "you oughtn't."

When they were back in the parlour the old man said to Coral with a gloomy shake of the head :

"He takes after his mother. And she took after her mother. Jenny used to speak to me just as sharp as that. ' Beer and bed. That's all you think of,' she said to me once. And I never forgot it. You know it seemed to . . . well, it was the truth in a manner of speaking; but I didn't want to be told it by her."

"How dare you speak about Jenny," exclaimed May, appearing in the doorway from the kitchen. "And I'm surprised at you," she said to Coral, "letting him talk like that about Frank's mother."

Poor Coral did not know what to do to appease May,

Coral

and she stood in nervous silence while Charlie defended himself.

"What was I saying about Frank's mother that I wouldn't have said to Jenny herself? She *had* a very quick tongue. So had your mother. So have you. And so it seems has young Frank. Well, I haven't. And that's why I notice it when other people have."

But May was not going to accept any plea of justification.

"I wish I'd never have gone to the pictures that Easter week. You always did rub me the wrong way, dad, and you always will, and it would have been much better if we'd never have seen each other again."

"Aunt May, how can you say anything so unkind as that?" Coral protested.

"Please, don't *you* interfere," May said frigidly.

Coral was conscious of so much suppressed malice in the way her aunt spoke to her that she began to despair of things ever going right in Dairymaids Row. She had thought that, at any rate, she was getting on well with Aunt May, but evidently in spite of all her efforts she was still regarded by her as an unwelcome intruder. It was too discouraging.

"Now don't be silly," said Charlie. "She's no more interfering than what I am. Come on, my girl, let's go and have one round the corner."

"I'll come to the pictures with you, if you like," Coral volunteered.

"All right," Charlie agreed in a tone of gloomy resignation. "That is, so long as you won't keep on prodding me all the time to ask me if I've seen something which has been switched off before I've had time to see it."

When Coral got home about half-past ten she found that her aunt had already gone to bed, and that Frank

Sharp Tongues

was still working. She wondered if she dared attempt to make some soup for him; but when she went out into the kitchen, two blackbeetles ran across the floor, and she fled upstairs to bed.

When Frank came up, he did not speak for several minutes, but sat down in a chair and began to sew a button on his waistcoat.

"I'll do that," Coral volunteered, sitting up in bed.

"Thanks very much, but it's been lying about waiting for you to do it since last Monday."

"But you didn't ask me."

"You know if I leave my clothes lying around it means they want something doing to them. You never bothered to look."

He resumed his sewing in silence.

"I suppose you're cross because I told your grandfather about your invention?" Coral said at last.

"Oh, no! I like to have it blared about all over London."

"But surely nobody is going to pay any attention to what an old man like that says?"

"That's not the point. When you first asked me about my work and wanted me to tell you all about it, I said you wouldn't understand, and I said that you wouldn't be able to keep quiet about it. Well, I was right, wasn't I?"

"Frank," said Coral in desperation, "I cannot understand why you treat me like this. What is your object? Are you trying to make me leave you? Are you finding that you've made a mistake in marrying me?"

He made no reply, but went on with his sewing.

"You're so unfair," she said. "You know that I'm determined to play my part, and you're just trying to see how much I'll stand. Well, I can stand much, much more than you think."

Coral

"Can you?" said Frank, looking at her coldly. "I wonder?"

"Yes, I can," she managed to reply as coldly as he, though she wanted to scream, for every time he pushed the needle into the cloth she felt that he was pushing it into her, and every time he drew the thread through she felt as if it was one of the nerves in her own body that he was pulling.

CHAPTER XXXIX

CORAL AND MAY

ALL the good that Coral had done herself in May Raeburn's eyes by the quick and pleasant way in which she had adapted herself to that trying tea-party on the afternoon of her arrival was destroyed by that unlucky remark of Charlie about his daughter Jenny. May could only behold in her nephew's wife a figure as fatal as in the past Maurice Avery had been to the happiness and fortune of their family life. All Coral's attempts to learn something about housekeeping for a poor man she attributed to a love of interference, and not merely to that, but even to a desire to get rid of herself altogether from Dairy-maids Row. Having lived for so many years an almost completely solitary existence, May had no friends with whom in talking over Coral's 'delinquencies' she might have discovered that they were imaginary. She had thought of paying a visit to Castleton in the Temple; but she had an instinct that he would for once be unsympathetic. He would take Coral's part and make excuses for her on the ground that she was a 'lady.' May saw with considerable pleasure that everything was not perfectly well between Frank and his wife; but, though she lost no occasion to widen any little rift between them, she was careful not to criticize Coral too obviously lest she should rouse his 'contrariness.'

Coral was miserably aware of her aunt's growing hostility, and one afternoon—a blazing brazen afternoon

Coral

in July—she made up her mind to try to clear up the misunderstanding.

“Aunt May, when I first came you were very kind to me. Why have you taken this dislike to me lately? I don’t think you realize how unhappy it makes me. I expect you think that I’m much less easy to upset than I really am, just because I do try not to show it.”

May regarded the young woman whose candid and untroubled eyes seemed to contradict utterly the words that had just fallen from her grave lips. Her own fierce, little dark eyes glittered in hard and contemptuous disbelief; the very faintest flush tinted her high waxen cheeks, and the very slightest tremor shook her fragile form.

“No, I *don’t* think so,” she said. “I think it would take more than me to upset you. But if you want to know why I’ve turned against you lately, it’s because of the way you and dad were talking about my dead sister.”

“But we weren’t talking about her, Aunt May. You’re quite wrong. You happened to overhear your father say that Frank had inherited his sharp tongue from his mother, and she from her mother. He said the same about you, if you remember. It may have seemed to you an unkind thing to say, but Frank had just been very unpleasant to him out in his workshop, and the old man was feeling a bit sore. He is an old man. I think you’re apt to forget that. And though he jokes about it, he’s not at all happy in his home life. I think it was a tremendous pleasure to meet you again, and I think he has felt a little mortified sometimes by the way he has been treated.”

“He shouldn’t have gone and got married again,” May said. “Serve him right if he is unhappy. Lots of people get married in haste and repent it afterwards,” she added darkly.

“I suppose by ‘lots of people’ you mean Frank?”

Coral and May

"Perhaps I do. Perhaps I don't. If the cap fits, wear it."

"Well, if it was a mistake for Frank to marry me, what have I done since to make the mistake worse? I evidently have done something. But I have tried, indeed, Aunt May, I have tried to sink myself in him."

"Yes, that's it," cried May angrily. "Sink yourself! You're so much above him that you have to sink yourself. That's a fine way for a wife to talk. Well, if you think you've sunk yourself by marrying Frank, I don't think so."

"Oh, dear," said Coral in distress. "I wasn't meaning that I was lowering myself. I meant by 'sink myself' that I had tried to live only for Frank's comfort and happiness."

"His comfort," May sneered. "If he depended on you for his comfort, *you* might live, but *he* wouldn't."

So bitterly did her aunt say this, such malevolence was in her aspect, that Coral was seized by a panic. The little thing opposite to her was like the bad fairy at the christening. She wondered if her aunt hated her for her tallness and fairness, because she herself was so dark and tiny. It might be that. Or did she hate her merely out of jealousy over Frank? Anyhow, hate her she did, and Coral, who had never known what it was to be hated, was terrified. Nor could she even think of any way of propitiating her so that she would remain, if not friendly, at least neutral. To find an entrance to her heart was seeming impossible, yet surely somehow she could avert her active malice.

"I wish I could persuade you that I wasn't listening to a word against Frank's mother," she said. "I wish I could. But you never speak about her to me, and if I ask Frank anything he simply says that she died when he was almost a baby."

Coral

"There's nothing I could tell *you* about her that *you'd* care to hear," May declared. "Let dad do the telling for you."

"Aunt May, Aunt May, I think you're cruel," Coral cried.

"Well, you shouldn't have married into this family which has such sharp tongues. You didn't lose a sister who was the only person you loved in all the world. Why, she was everything to me, Jenny was. What did I care about dad? Why, for twenty years and more I didn't trouble to find out if he was dead or alive. What did I care for my other sister Edie? I don't know where she is now, and I don't care. Or my brother Alfie? He's nothing to me. Nothing. There was only her in all the world."

"How did she die?"

"Don't ask me that, you. Don't ask me that. But she died all of a sudden, and she left Frank for me to bring up, and which I did. And then you wanted him for yourself, and you got him. And now you dare say you've sunk yourself in him. Well, if you can make him happy, get on with doing it. But if you ask me, you never will make him happy—no, not if you was to sink yourself oceans deep. What can you do? Nothing. You can't even cook a sausage but what you make it look like something that's fallen down the chimney. You can't boil an egg but what the inside of it comes out like the inner tube of a bicycle tyre. You can't sweep a carpet or scrub a floor. You can't dust. You can't sew. You can't even lay the table. All you can do is go out and buy a lot of flowers that nobody wants and cram full every jug what is wanted. You can't turn a mattress without it looks like the camel at the Zoo. You can't go to a shop without spending twice as much as you ought, and getting the wrong kind of everything at the end of it

Coral and May

You broke two cups the last time you tried to wash up. And when you did the washing you washed the clean sheets what I'd already made the bed with. Look at the aprons you bought for yourself! Why, anyone else 'ud wonder if they was big enough for handkerchiefs! Yes, it's all right now while I'm still here, and Frank's in work, and you've still got some of your father's money. But wait a bit, and then you'll see if you can make Frank happy. You may have to sink a bit deeper yet. Yes, a lot deeper."

It was about the time of this scene with May that Coral first knew that she was going to have a child. In her condition the thought of her aunt's ill-will dreadfully affected her imagination. She asked herself in affright what would be the effect upon her child of this unrelenting hostility. If her enemy should guess her condition, would not her jealousy be doubled? Would she not throw a spell upon the unborn child? And might not her own daily contemplation of May distort the straightness of that which was within her?

It began to seem imperative to leave Dairymaids Row and escape from this malign influence. She resolved to beg Frank to do all he could to get a job that would take him away from London. He had already been complaining of his existence as a taxi-driver and saying that he should earn a little less and have more time to himself. A country place would suit him, because he probably would not be kept out at night so often. Yes, when she told him about the child that would be theirs next March, she would plead for the country. March! The month in which their love had blossomed openly like the first flowers of the spring.

CHAPTER XL

THE PROMISE

"FRANK, if I tell you something that only really concerns us two, will you promise me not to tell anyone else just at present?"

He was leaning out of the bedroom window, trying to get some air from the hot July night, so hot that the fervid stars, thick in the moonless sky, seemed like points of glowing metal. On the windowsill next door a pot of musk fresh watered seemed to shed the sweet coolness of another world.

"Frank, will you promise me?" she asked again, touching lightly his shoulder.

He came back into the airless little room.

"It depends what it is," he said.

"Can't you guess?"

"Well, I suppose I can," he admitted.

"And aren't you glad? Frank, you are glad, aren't you?"

"I'm glad in one way. Well, it's rather like watching an experiment. I mean it's interesting to see what a child of ours will be like. All the same, I'm not sure that it's coming just at the right moment for me."

"It will come in March. Frank, perhaps it will come on the very night that you and I stood by the river on Chelsea Embankment and kissed for the first time?"

"In March," said Frank meditatively. "Well, I might have got it right by then. I might get it right to-morrow if it comes to that."

The Promise

He was thinking about his flying apparatus, she told herself sadly. This child of theirs was nothing compared with that. But she tried to console herself by saying that after all Frank's invention was to him like an unborn child, and that she could not expect him to feel the thrill that she felt.

"Frank," she went on nervously, "I've been thinking, and unless it will upset your work too much, I wish you'd consider trying for a place somewhere in the country."

"Tired of Dairymaids Row already?" he asked with a smile.

"I'm not thinking about myself. At least, of course, I am indirectly. But really why I want to go away from here is on account of our child. I want the best of myself to be given to it. And somehow here I don't seem to be at my best. Perhaps it's this ghastly hot weather, but I'm feeling run down and tired. I've got into my head that I want to escape into the country. Women do get obsessions at such times."

"You haven't been getting on very well with auntie lately, have you?"

"Oh, it's not that we've been getting on badly. But I know that she resents my presence. She resents our marriage. And if she were to resent our child I don't know what I should do."

"Well, I'll think about it and see. There may not be the right kind of job going anywhere in the country. And I couldn't afford to live anywhere else but here if we were in London. I want every penny I can get for my work."

"But don't you think that you might find it easier to work in the country?"

"Well, it might be easier to work if I hadn't got to spend so much time with a taxi," he admitted.

Coral was greatly relieved by the way Frank had taken her suggestion. She had feared that he would

Coral

reject it at once as quite absurd. Moreover, although he pretended an indifference about the news she had given him, he was more affectionate with her to-night than he had been for several weeks. In his heart he was evidently pleased, but like a man he would have to hide his pleasure for the sake of his own dignity. She lay in his arms that night nearer to the contentment of which she had dreamed than ever since their honeymoon.

A fortnight later Frank said to her:

"Coral, if I was to tell you that I'd given up the taxi and taken a place in the country, would you promise me something?"

"I'd promise you anything."

"And keep your promise?"

"Of course, I should keep it. My idea of a promise is something that *must* be kept."

"All right, Mrs. Proud," he laughed. "Good lord, sometimes I think you're still Miss Avery of Nine Little Queen Street."

"What do you want me to promise?"

"Why, I want you to give me your word, honest and no finding any excuse, that you won't see any of your family, or write to them, or communicate with them in any way, unless I say you can."

She looked astonished.

"But we agreed at Bournemouth after those letters that I wouldn't see them. I've kept to that agreement. You don't think, do you, that I've had any communication with them since we came back to London?"

"I haven't tried to find out."

"But I should have told you! Frank, sometimes I wonder if you understand anything about me."

"Oh, yes, I do. That's why I want you to make that promise now."

"Very well then, if you want a vow, I promise you

The Promise

solemnly that I will have nothing to do with my people."

"You won't go and see them?" he pressed.

"No, nor write to them nor hold any kind of communication with them except by your consent."

He breathed a sigh of relief.

"That's all right. Well, then, I'll take this place I've been offered in the country."

"Oh, Frank, my darling, I'm so glad! Who is it with?"

"Sir Giles Amersham."

"Amersham?" she repeated. "Haven't I heard that name somewhere? It sounds familiar. Where does he live?"

"Amersham Grange, Wiltshire."

"Wiltshire."

"Yes; Amersham Grange is just a mile or so away from Merryfield. So, you see, I had a jolly good reason for asking you to make that promise, hadn't I?"

"I think you got it out of me rather unfairly."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"All right, then, we won't go to Wiltshire. We'll stay where we are."

But Coral, thinking what it would mean to stay in Dairymaids Row with Aunt May during the next few months, decided that she should prefer the propinquity of her family, prefer indeed any place anywhere on earth. to doing that.

"My promise will be kept," she said gravely.

He laughed in triumph.

CHAPTER XLI

COUNTRY LIFE

FRANK was not too well pleased with the cottage that Sir Giles Amersham had provided for his chauffeur.

"What's he think I am—a labourer?" he demanded indignantly.

"But, my dear, it's lovely," Coral assured him.

It was an ancient thatched cottage, flanked on one side by a gnarled apple tree, and protected at the back by a plantation of oaks, the edge of which was powdered thick with bramble blossom. The latticed porch was crowned by clematis and honeysuckle. The long, narrow garden, still ablaze with old-fashioned blush roses, ran down in front of the cottage to the home-farm road.

"Quite lovely," she repeated.

"Is it lovely? Why, it's as cock-eyed as a broken-down Ford. Lovely? Yes, you won't think it's quite so lovely when you've got to hoick up all your water from that unnatural well. And if *you* like sleeping in a room that looks as if the ceiling was coming down on top of you, I don't. I thought they'd done away with places like this. Well, you may like it now, but you won't like it in the bad weather, that's a sure thing."

Coral soon found out to her great relief that her people had not yet come to live at Merryfield. They had been expected this summer; but, although the decoration of the house was finished, it had remained empty so far. She was afraid that when Frank heard he was not to have the satisfaction of thrusting her humble circumstances

Country Life

upon the notice of her family, he would take other means to gratify his resentment about those two unfortunate letters. However, apparently he told nobody who she was, for she did not find herself exposed to more than the ordinary curiosity over any new-comer to a countryside. He certainly had not confided in Sir Giles himself, for when Coral met him for the first time he treated her with the friendly indifference he would have shown toward the wives of any of his servants.

"Good morning, Mrs. Abel."

"Good morning, sir," she managed to gulp.

"Quite comfortably settled in now?"

"Oh, yes, thanks, quite. I mean, yes, thank you, sir," she corrected herself to reply.

"The wagon brought all your furniture safely?"

Coral had pulled herself together by now.

"Yes, Sir Giles."

"What part of the country do you come from? You don't sound like a Londoner."

"I am a Londoner."

"Are you? Well, I hope you'll enjoy country life. Abel seemed rather distressed that the water wasn't laid on inside the cottage. But I dare say you'll manage. I'm afraid my cottages are all too scattered for me to install pipes in these hard times. Well, I hope you'll be comfortable. Good morning to you."

"Good morning, Sir Giles."

Coral had an idea that she ought to drop a curtsy; but, while she was thinking about it and trying not to feel like an actress in amateur theatricals, Sir Giles passed on. She was glad that he was a bachelor, and that she should not be called upon to be treated with an even greater condescension by a Lady Amersham.

Coral asked her husband how he liked Sir Giles.

"He's all right."

Coral

"Yes, I suppose he'd be all right if you had some definite job to do for him," she went on. "But, of course, he makes me feel as if I were a pig or a sheep that wasn't earning its keep."

"He probably did think you looked a bit helpless," Frank said with a touch of contempt in his voice. "If he'd have come inside and seen the kitchen, he might have stared a bit harder, because it is more like a pigsty than anything else. Or I think so."

"It's impossible for one pair of hands to do everything at once," Coral answered. "You forget that I've had all the furniture to polish after the move. And you yourself said how difficult it was not having the water laid on in the house. Besides, you will sit about in the kitchen all the time. Why on earth you won't ever use the parlour I cannot imagine."

"You'd only grumble if I did."

"Don't be so ridiculous, Frank. Of course I shouldn't. What's a sitting-room for?"

"Well, it isn't meant for lounging about on brand-new furniture, that's a sure thing," he answered her in the sort of voice he might have used to an unreasonable child.

Coral turned away without pressing her argument. She should not be able to convince Frank, and in any case it was her duty to learn how to keep the cottage tidy and to make him comfortable. It would be too mortifying if presently he should point out to her how much better off he had been with Aunt May to look after him.

One of Coral's chief difficulties in housekeeping was to resist the temptation of returning from market with something that was more ornamental than useful. She would walk into the little market town with the intention of being dropped at the cross-roads by the local motor-bus, loaded with all sorts of necessary groceries; but when she

found herself in Trowbury she would see some flowers that took her fancy, or perhaps discover in the second-hand furniture shop an attractive sampler or a set of old green wine-glasses. Then home she would come, her extravagance seeming more and more of an extravagance with every quarter of a mile that the great bus (a converted lorry) drew nearer to the cross-roads, from which it was one more quarter of a mile down a deep lane to their cottage. She would feel more and more guilty as one after another she passed the various trees that overhung her path; and from the shade of each one she would emerge more positive than ever that there was less excuse for buying what she had bought than she had supposed at the time, until finally she would arrive at the cottage feeling as Jack in the fairy-tale may have felt when he had to tell his mother that he had sold her only calf for five brightly coloured beans. And she used to be all the more ashamed of herself because the groceries she would have passed over in favour of wine-glasses or flowers would not be tea or sugar which would have been noticed at once, but such dull necessities for the housewife as blacklead or scrubbing soap, of the lack of which only she was aware.

However, as the days went on, Coral did succeed in curing herself of coming back from Trowbury with something entirely different from what she had gone in to buy; and gradually she did learn to cook nearly up to the standard of the average English cook, with which Englishmen, being the most tolerant creatures on earth, are content. When the time came for the golden web of benign October weather to be shattered by blustering gales, Coral was sufficiently expert at keeping her cottage in order to have leisure to make an attempt at sewing the tiny garments she would need in spring. It was not the finest needlework, and it reminded her of the days when

Coral

at the prompting of her governess she had tried with conspicuous clumsiness to make clothes for her dolls.

But it was pleasant to sit sewing by the light of the lamp, musing over the sweet-scented summer days that were gone and the friendships she had made with other wives on the estate. In that, at any rate, Coral could claim a success. Everybody seemed to like her. Nobody thought that she gave herself airs above her station. She wished that Frank would sit with her sometimes after tea; but unless he was occupied with the car, which was seldom, he was, now that the unsettlement of the move had passed, more busily occupied with his invention than ever. Once, when she remonstrated with him for always leaving her alone, he reminded her that she used to grumble at the way he sat about in the kitchen. Never mind, Coral thought, in March he would be a father, and that must surely change him in many ways. For one thing, he would feel at last that he and she were indissolubly one. With that assurance he might be willing to forgive her parents for the way they had received the news of their daughter's marriage. Perhaps her father would come to Merryfield in the spring, and perhaps they would all be reconciled. Thus dreamed Coral, sitting in the lamplight by the fireside, while outside above the loud October wind she could hear the sound of Frank's hammering. Thus dreamed she, sewing the baby clothes so clumsily.

CHAPTER XLII

BILLS

ONE heavy grey November afternoon when the moisture was dripping from the eaves and the fire was smoking, Frank came in and flung down a piece of paper on the kitchen table.

"This is a nice thing," he burst out. "While I was waiting for Sir Giles to come out of court this morning, before driving him over to lunch at Quarrington, the woman who keeps the fruit-shop in the market-place came out and asked was I Mr. Abel, and said would I give Mrs. Abel her little bill, because she thought it must have got overlooked. 'Bill?' I said. 'What bill has she been running with you?' 'Oh, just a few flowers and things,' she said, 'and as I haven't seen her in the market-place lately, I thought she might be ill and perhaps have forgotten about her little account.' One pound seven and ninepence for a lot of blooming flowers! You must be mad, Coral, if you think I'm going to spring one pound seven and ninepence for you to mess up the whole place with flowers!"

"I'm sorry, Frank. I had forgotten it wasn't paid. You know I don't go in to Trowbury so often these days. I haven't bought any flowers for a long time now. It was only at first, when the cottage seemed rather bare."

"But, hang it all," Frank cried in exasperation, "the blooming garden was full of flowers. What did you want to go spending one pound seven and ninepence on buying flowers for?"

Coral

"It was inconsiderate and silly of me," Coral admitted.

"Silly? It was worse than silly. It was damn silliness! You know I want every bit of cash we can spare for my own work, and you go throwing it all away on flowers! Why, you wouldn't spend one pound seven and ninepence if anyone was dead, and, if you ask me, even that's always a rotten waste of money. Still, I wouldn't have said so much if it had been for a funeral. But just to fill up a room . . ." words failed him.

"It shan't happen again. I promise you."

"Promises won't put 'paid' on this bill," he growled. "Have you got any other little accounts running in Trowbury?"

"There may be one or two," Coral replied. "But the whole lot wouldn't amount to five pounds."

"Five pounds? But dash it, girl, can't you get into your head what five pounds means to me? You talk as if I could pick up five pounds whenever I wanted it."

"I can sell a bit of my jewellery."

"Sell your jewellery! Anybody would think to hear you talk that your boxes was crammed with diamonds and pearls. What brooches and things you've got you'd better keep, because you won't get no more."

Coral was glad she had never told Frank that she had already got rid of several trinkets at the curiosity shop in exchange for bits of furniture she had coveted. Frank was queer, she thought. So long as she had not asked him for money to pay for things, he had never asked her how the things were paid for. Yet he must have noticed the green wine-glasses, and those china dogs, and certainly that pretty little walnut chest of drawers. But he had never said a word until this paltry bill was brought before his eyes. Were other men like that?

That question recurred to her when she was alone again after tea, dreaming in the lamplight and sewing.

Would her boy be like that? Her John? She had not yet told Frank that he was to be called John, but whatever he should say she was determined on this name. Would John be like that when he grew up? Of course she should not want him to be extravagant; but neither should she want him to be quite like his father over money. Oh, she must achieve that family reconciliation somehow! John must be brought up properly. Her father had been right when he had warned her that she would think differently about poverty when she had a child. John *must* be educated. After all, it would be unfair to deny him the advantages to which, at any rate, he was half entitled. He might inherit Frank's taste for mechanics, but that did not mean that he would have to be content with being a chauffeur. The cleverer he was the bigger chance he ought to be given. He could become a great engineer. In these lamplit dreams Coral beheld her son twenty years hence. He was exactly like his father to look at—tall and slim and dark, with slanting eyes and lips as fine and red as silk; but the way he talked was quite different, for that was just like the way her father talked, and he was wearing an Old Etonian tie like Lucius.

But suppose instead of being John at all it should be a girl? Perhaps in a way it would be better if it were a girl, because then there would be less chance of Frank being jealous. He might be jealous of a son who was given a greater importance than himself. And perhaps this little girl would be like Frank's mother when she was a little girl. Perhaps she would grow up to be like that big photograph over the mantelpiece in Dairymaids Row. If it should be a girl she should propose Jenny for her name. Frank would like that. And later a boy might come. Jenny and John. How happy they would all be together! Things would be so different when there

Coral

were children. This was really the most difficult time, just now when Frank was worried about his invention, and she herself was so much preoccupied and was still such a terribly bad housekeeper, and when the family quarrel was hanging over them like a cloud. But when Jenny came—or John—why, everything would be changed.

Thus dreamed Coral, sitting in the lamplight by the dull grate, while outside above the drip of the November mist she could hear the sound of Frank's hammering. Thus dreamed she, sewing the baby clothes so clumsily.

CHAPTER XLIII

FRANK'S FLIGHT

ONE fine January morning, when the missel-thrushes were singing in the shrubberies of Amersham Grange and the laurel leaves were glittering in the sun, Frank asked Coral if she felt like walking with him up to the top of the downs. She would not have refused to accompany him for anything, although she was not feeling particularly robust that morning.

"I've got the day off," he explained.

But Coral could not believe that a few hours of leisure were enough to make his eyes as bright as the winter day, and for a moment she flattered herself with the fancy that sentiment had led him to propose this expedition. This idea was swiftly succeeded by the dread that her people had arrived at Merryfield and that Frank intended to show her off to them in some humiliating way.

"You're not going to Merryfield?" she stammered.

"Why should I take you there?"

"I thought perhaps my people had come back."

"Not yet, worse luck," he said.

"Then why do you want to take me up on the downs?" she asked.

"If you wait till we get there you'll see," he said in a voice that quivered with subdued exultation. "Of course, if you don't want to come, don't put yourself out to please me."

"You know I want to come. You know I do."

Coral

"That's all right, then. Only don't be a month getting your things on."

Coral rejoiced in the assurance that he really did desire her company; and it was an unwillingness to imperil by the least want of tact this dependency, even if it were but a fleeting dependency, upon herself that prevented her inquiring what was the large parcel with which he had burdened himself. So in silence they trudged on through the groves of holm-oak that surrounded the Grange demesne, splashed along the silver-rutted farm road, on past the farm, and on across the lower slopes until they reached the fosse that ran like a long green scar diagonally across the face of the downs. It was a stiff climb for Coral in her present condition, and it was not made easier by the speed with which Frank was walking, all the time faster and faster.

"Excelsior!" Coral gasped merrily. "Oh, Frank, I simply must sit down and rest for a moment. I'm dead beat."

He stood over her, obviously impatient of the delay.

"You'll only go and catch a cold," he said grudgingly.

In defiance of the sunshine, the green spaces up here were still lightly gossamerred with hoar-frost.

"How much farther up are we going?" she asked.

"I want to get to the top—above the Trowbury Giant," he added, pointing to the huge figure cut out in the chalk two miles and more away.

"Can I do it?" she asked, standing up in her big pale-blue coat of frieze and surveying the object of this pilgrimage. "Yes, I think so, if you'll not walk so fast, Frank, and," she added, "if you'll reveal the secret of that enormous package you're carrying."

"I'll tell you when we get to the top."

For the rest of the way Coral tried to engage him in conversation by pointing, now to a rabbit scampering over

Frank's Flight

the diamonded turf, now to the lonely hut of some shepherd who, under the frosty stars, kept his nightly vigil upon these slopes, tending the new-born lambs. But Frank was not interested in earth nor in the creatures of earth. The trees and towers and twining rivers of the vale below said nothing to him, nor the wood-smoke that bloomed the air above hidden cottages, nor the roofs of Trowbury in a sheen of wintry sunlight. His gaze was set on the tenuous blue of the sky above, upon the subtle and pervasive sky, and upon that summit of the downs round and bald as a skull where he was ambitious to stand.

They arrived at last. Frank said nothing to Coral now about catching cold when, tired out, she sank down upon the turf. Indeed, he paid no attention to her, but busied himself with unpacking the contents of the parcel, strewing the turf with jointed canes and pieces of a material that resembled oil-silk.

It dawned on Coral why he had brought her up here.

"Frank, you've succeeded! You're going to fly. Oh, my darling, how splendid!"

"Well, don't shout too loud beforehand," he said. "I haven't succeeded yet. But I'm going to have a jolly good try."

Then, as bit by bit the confusion of joints and material took shape as wings, Coral was seized with affright for his safety; she felt she must deter him from trusting himself to this fragile toy of his own making. He that once had seemed to her as strong as steel now seemed as easy to snap as a branch of the withered thorn-bush by which he was standing. Yet she knew better than to try to dissuade him, and in an agony of apprehension she watched his silent preparations. At last he was ready. The shining black wings were fastened to his back and shoulders, which were themselves clad in shining black

Coral

leather. Round his neck was hung what looked like a petrol can.

"Stand well back out of my way," he shouted. "I may find it a bit difficult to steer at first."

There was a buzz of wheels from the engine. The wings began to shiver and hum. Coral felt a prey to twin terrors. She feared for him, but at the same time she was terrified of him as she was always terrified when a beetle shook wings from its carapace and launched itself droning upon the air.

But, although the wings shivered and hummed louder than ever, the black form of Frank did not rise; and Coral, forgetting her terrors, was filled only with a great compassion for him in the bitterness of his disappointment.

"My dear, my dear," she cried, hurrying to console him, "won't it work?"

"Go back!" he commanded, and the expression on his face was that of a wounded hawk in its sullen bewilderment and rage.

But loud though the engine roared and rapidly as the wings vibrated, Frank remained earthbound. At last he stopped the engine and disembarrassed himself of the treacherous wings.

"Frank, I am so sorry for your disappointment. And you were so nearly going up once or twice."

"I evidently haven't solved the problem of lifting myself from the ground with this design," he said. "But, anyway, I'll test it in descent. There's an old chalk-pit over there which will give me the sheer drop I want."

He paid no heed to Coral's entreaties not to try any more to-day, and when she became almost hysterical in her pleading he shook off her hand.

"Stay where you are if it makes you feel nervous," he told her. "I know perfectly well what I'm doing."

With that he hurried away to where the long green

Frank's Flight

roller of turf broke in chalk as a wave of the sea in foam.

She called vainly after him to come back ; but suddenly a dreadful faintness overcame her, and she collapsed upon the sticky turf.

Several minutes passed before she could recover herself sufficiently to rise and follow Frank to where with outspread wings in silhouette against the sky he was standing above the edge of the quarry. She had not toiled across half the space of rolling green that separated them when she saw him plunge forward and disappear from sight over the edge.

CHAPTER XLIV

THE CHALK-PIT

CORAL never knew how she reached the top of the chalk-pit without fainting on the way. She was quite convinced that she should look over and see Frank lying dead at the bottom or, almost worse, hopelessly injured, herself incapable of reaching him before he died.

That stretch of sticky turf seemed as long as the whole of her life had been until this moment. Human help would not have seemed more unimaginably remote in the silence and loneliness of these uplands than if she were lost on a mountain of the moon. There was not even a bird in the bright, cruel air. There was not even a snail in her path. There was nothing except the chill of wintry death.

But when Coral reached the edge of the chalk-pit and looked down, she saw Frank quite unhurt taking his wings to pieces.

"Hullo, Coral!" he called up to her. "If you follow the edge down we can get back on to the road without me having to drag this contraption of mine up to the top again. I've finished for to-day."

"Oh, Frank," she cried to him, "you frightened me almost into another world! I made sure I should find you dead."

He laughed as merrily as his disappointment over the failure of his design would allow him; but when she stood once more by his side he did put his arms round her, and the kiss he gave her made all of what she had suffered worth while.

The Chalk-Pit

"I shall go back to birds," he proclaimed.

She looked puzzled.

"Well, I've been experimenting for the last few months with vibrations. I got the idea from seeing a whopping big beetle suddenly get out his wings and fly when I'd been prodding him once too often. But I suppose I can't get the necessary number of vibrations. Yes, I reckon I'll go back to where I was and get on again with birds' wings. You ought to have seen me just now. I kept in the air for well over ten seconds before I landed. But I didn't go forward a yard. Yes, I reckon I'll go back to birds."

"But how can you get the power you want in that small box?" she asked, anxious to keep him in this communicative mood.

"Ha-ha, that's the great secret! You don't suppose I'm worrying if anybody knows I'm making wings. All the wings in the world wouldn't be any good for what I'm after unless they had the power behind them as I've got it. I tell you, it's only a question of time or money. If I had the money I'd have the right wings in a month. Only I don't want to give away the secret of how I'm going to move them. See?"

"Well, why not let me ask my father for the money?" Coral suggested.

"Now don't start in on that talk," Frank warned her, "or you'll get me ratty. I was a bit fed-up when my contraption wouldn't work. Well, it is a bit sickening when you've worked at something for weeks and it turns out a blooming wash-out. But I've got over the disappointment now. So don't get me wrong again by starting in about your father. I'm not going to take a halfpenny from him, and that's flat. He may be proud. But I'm proud too. He thinks he's been disgraced because his daughter's gone and married a common

Coral

chauffeur. But I'd think I was just as much disgraced if I took money from him."

"But, Frank, I'm sure that he would have helped you before there was any question of our being married. He did like you very much. He really did. I wouldn't ask him to help you because you've married me. I'd simply put it up to him as a matter of business."

"Now look here, don't go on arguing. I'm not going to ask him myself, and I'm not going to let you ask him for me. That's flat. So shut up and make the best of a fine day."

But Coral was hating the fineness of the day. She was overwrought by her fright and quite incapable of surrendering in the way she usually surrendered to Frank. Besides, there would soon be the child to think about.

"Well, will you let me ask him for some money for myself? Then I wouldn't feel that I was a burden to you."

"No."

"Frank, do try to see my point of view," she begged. "Can't you realize that I know I'm not the wife you ought to have?"

"What do you mean?" he said, glowering. "It's a pity you didn't discover that before you married me."

"Don't get offended before you understand what I'm trying to tell you. I don't mean in the least that I'm regretting having married you for my own sake. What I mean is that I realize my own shortcomings. I know what a bad housekeeper I am. I know that I often spend more money than I need and that I don't really make you comfortable. If you would let me accept an allowance from my father I'd not feel that I was such a burden, and I could afford to waste a bit of money in trying to learn to look after you better. Frank, I am so terribly anxious to pay my way. Can't you understand that? And now with somebody else coming I'm beginning to feel

The Chalk-Pit

frightened about the future. It's so important that you should be able to get on well with your experiments."

"Don't you worry your head about my experiments. They'll look after themselves. Anyway, if you take a halfpenny from your father I'll never have you inside a house of mine from that day on."

"Frank, don't you love me any more? "

"Now, you know I'm fond of you. Well, love you if you like it better. Though it sounds soppy for married folk to talk like that."

"But you could live without me? "

"Look here, if you're going to ask me silly, soppy questions the whole way home I'll walk on ahead and leave you. Why can't you be sensible? We've had a very interesting morning, and you've had a chance to see that I *have* got something up my sleeve to surprise them with. Don't let's spoil it by nagging at one another. You've married me, and I'm going to keep you and no one else. When I start in telling you I wish I hadn't have married you, then you can start in trying to find somebody else to look after you. But till then you'll kindly allow me to know what's best for you and I."

Coral gave up and concentrated all her will upon the long walk home. And when at last they reached the cottage she said faintly :

"Frank, I'm so sorry, darling, but I think I'm going to be ill. You did say you had the whole day, didn't you? I don't want to be silly, but I think you ought to fetch the doctor. Perhaps you could get either Mrs. Wilson or Mrs. Ames to come round to me while you're gone. But do so quickly, darling. I'm sure I'm not making a fuss about nothing."

CHAPTER XLV

MRS. WILSON AND MRS. AMES

THERE was no question of either Mrs. Wilson or Mrs. Ames. Both ladies, as soon as they heard of Frank's going into Trowbury to fetch the doctor, hurried round to support Coral with a combined maternal experience of sixty years. Mrs. Wilson, who was the wife of the coachman, had had a larger family than Mrs. Ames, the wife of the head gardener; but what Mrs. Ames lacked in numbers she made up for by the loquacious pessimism of her conversation.

"It's to be hoped he'll find the doctor at home," she said gloomily. "But it isn't hardly likely at this hour of the afternoon."

"Now don't you take on too much, my child," Mrs. Wilson entreated Coral. "Keep your sperrits up, there's a good girl. Mrs. Ames and me is perfectly able to look after you, supposing Abel don't bring him back in time. And nobody couldn't have been nicer than what Sir Giles was when he was asked if he'd any erbjection to the car being used. Well, he might have been a married man himself, I'm sure. No married man could have been nicer."

"Most married men is terrors," Mrs. Ames put in. "I can't say I think *much* of bachelors, but they're a bit better than married men."

"Wilson was only vexed the roads was so slippery in the frost he didn't like to offer to drive the chestnut in the trap. But there, as he said, whatever anyone might say

Mrs. Wilson and Mrs. Ames

about motors you didn't have to consider them not in the way anyone's got to consider horses."

Thus the coachman's wife.

"Well, all I hope is," said Mrs. Ames, "that, what with being so flurried and all, Abel don't go and drive into nothing. That was a shocking motor accident last week up in Scotland, and the week before there was a very nasty smash up on the railway, and I don't know if you read in the Sunday's paper about those two poor children who fell into the Manchester Canal and was drowned to death. Oh dear, oh dear, it quite took away my appetite, and now, I suppose, with the frost coming we shall hear of nothing but deaths from skating all over the country. Still, don't you worry your head, Mrs. Abel, for I dare say your husband *may* get as far as Trowbury without anything *much* happening, but if anything should happen to him, as Mrs. Wilson says, you've always got her and I to look after you, should it come to the pinch."

Coral paid little attention to either of the two women. All her mind was concentrated upon passing through her ordeal with dignity. She had a few moments of weakness when she thought about the publicity of it all, and she longed for the seclusion that would have been hers in other circumstances. She dreaded the arrival of the doctor, fearing lest he should use towards her that manner which doctors sometimes do use towards their poorer patients.

"Well, of course I never had one of mine not what they call prematchoor," Mrs. Wilson was confiding in Mrs. Ames.

"No, more didn't I, Mrs. Wilson. Certainly, my eldest what afterwards died out in Egypt, through him not being able to domesticate his food properly, well, he did have a strawberry mark on his shoulder, which I always contributed to Ames losing the medal for bush-fruit at the

Coral

Trowbury Horticultural just before my poor boy was born. Well, it cut Ames to the quick, and that's a fact. But would he ever admit it was his fault? Not he. He's been known for being as pig-headed as a brick wall all his life."

"Of course, it may not be what we think," Mrs. Wilson suggested. "Things isn't always what anyone thinks they is."

"No, so long as they isn't worse than what anyone thinks they is," Mrs. Ames replied gloomily. "I never did and I never shall believe in always looking on the bright side of things. Anyone's sure to be disappointed. I hate to see people go grinning round the world like a lot of monkey brands. I've always been very serious-minded myself, ever since I was a tiny tot. It takes a great deal to make me laugh. In fact, the only time I ever can remember having what you might call a reelly good laugh was once when Ames was taking the honey one year and slipped backwards into a cucumber frame, because, besides cutting himself he kicked over the hive and got stung all over. Well, as I said, either accident would have been funny, but both—well, both was reelly laughable."

And even the memory of her husband's misadventure was potent enough to draw from Mrs. Ames a hollow chuckle that sounded as ominous as the croak of a raven.

"It's colder than ever," announced Mrs. Wilson, who had opened the lattice to the silent frost of the January dusk. "Colder than ever, it is," she repeated.

"Yes, I expect Ames 'll lose a lot of his plants," said the gardener's wife with grim but distinctly pleasurable anticipation.

"And I can't hear not a sound of the motor nowhere," Mrs. Wilson continued.

Mrs. Wilson and Mrs. Ames

"No, nor you aren't likely to, Mrs. Wilson. Or not for a long time yet," Mrs. Ames declared.

But even as she spoke the horn of a motor sounded through the twilight like Roland's oliphant, and at the same moment a dazzling semilune swung clear of the topmost boughs of the oaks in the coppice.

"Ah, I dare say he's come back without the doctor, after all," said Mrs. Ames. "Hadn't you better close the window, Mrs. Wilson? We shall all catch our deaths in this perishing weather else."

But the gardener's wife was wrong. Dr. Hartford was very much there, so much so, indeed, that Mrs. Ames and Mrs. Wilson had both to retire far into the background.

Although he was evidently puzzled what to make of Coral, he did not allow his curiosity to get the better of his good manners, and she was grateful to him for the way he asked such questions as he had to ask.

CHAPTER XLVI

THE LITTLE GIRL

It was just before midnight when Coral's little girl was born.

"The smallest infant I ever see'd in all my life," Mrs. Ames whispered hoarsely to Mrs. Wilson. "Will the poor mite live twenty-four hours? That's the question I'm asking myself. And if I was to answer as I thought, I'd say 'No, certainly not.'"

Luckily Coral was oblivious of all conversation at that moment; but Dr. Hartford sharply told Mrs. Ames to keep her tongue quiet.

"Of course, my doctor for many years was old Dr. Waterlow, the poor, dear, old gentleman," Mrs. Ames whispered to her colleague, yet still loudly enough for Dr. Hartford to hear what she was saying. "And I will say of Dr. Waterlow, he had the most beautiful manners of anyone I ever knew. Well, I declare it was reelly a pleasure to take a drop of medicine from him. But, of course, you don't find doctors like Dr. Waterlow nowadays. You get a different class nowadays to what they used to be. Well, nowadays, you might say, anybody can be a doctor. It's been made too easy for them with all this free ejucation. I wonder where Abel is all this time. You'd have thought he'd have stayed in the next room. He might have had a hundred babies the off-handed way he takes it."

"He said he was going to do a bit of work out in the shed at the back, and asked would we call him if he was

The Little Girl

wanted," Mrs. Wilson said. "Why, talk of angels, I believe I hear him downstairs just come in. I'll go straight down and tell him he's a father."

An infinitely remote voice from the bed murmured "Frank."

"He can come up for a minute," Dr. Hartford said.

Mrs. Wilson, with portentous steps, went downstairs to fetch him.

"Darling," Coral whispered, "isn't she sweet?"

Frank looked down at the tiny form which had arrived too soon in this great world.

"Are you feeling all right now?" he inquired awkwardly.

"Happy," she sighed.

"I'm feeling a bit more cheerful myself," he said. "Because I think I've found out what was wrong with those wings."

"Have you, darling? I'm glad."

Then suddenly Coral clutched the bedclothes in alarm.

"You won't go up there again to-morrow?"

"Oh, no," Frank said cheerfully, "it'll take a week or two at least before I can fix them as I think they ought to be."

"I'm glad it'll take a little time," she said with a wan smile. Then she went on: "Frank, kneel down, will you? I want to tell you something."

He looked round self-consciously; but the bedroom was empty. Dr. Hartford was downstairs, giving directions to Mrs. Wilson and Mrs. Ames while he packed his things. Frank knelt down awkwardly beside the bed.

"Darling, I want to tell you a little secret I've been keeping. Listen, I want to call her Jenny, after your mother."

Frank sprang to his feet.

"That, no!" he cried.

Coral

"But, darling, why not?"

"You can have any name you like, but never that one."

"I thought you'd be glad," Coral sighed.

"Well, I'm not. I'd rather the kid had never been born than give her that name."

"Frank, how extraordinary you are!"

"Perhaps I am. Perhaps I'm not."

With this he turned and left her alone.

Coral did not sleep all that long winter night. It was seeming to her that Frank had told her definitely that he no longer cared for her. It had not been just his refusal of the name she had chosen to please him; it had been the way he had spoken and the way he had looked at her. The future crept as coldly into her spirit as into the room crept the frost. This baby beside her that was to have bound them so much closer together had already during her brief existence, taken them farther apart than they had ever been. All these months of waiting she had regarded as the painful but necessary trial of her wifehood. The reward had appeared so certain when at last this little thing should come. For a moment Coral came near to hating her baby, so bitter was the disappointment, so black appeared the prospect of her life with Frank. To live with him without love was not imaginable. All the evils prophesied by her father would then, indeed, come to pass. Her pride would not allow her to put up with her present circumstances unless the sacrifice of it was made endurable by love. If Frank should hate her, she might come to hating Frank. What excuses should she be able to find for him, once she could look into his eyes with indifference?

Below on his shakedown in the parlour Frank slept not much better than Coral that long, cold night. He was really proud and happy about the child that had been born

The Little Girl

to them; but he had been feeling self-conscious and embarrassed. He had not known how to express his penitence for having frightened her that afternoon and thereby nearly brought about a tragedy. His remark about the wings had not meant that he was oblivious of his wife's suffering. It was true that he had had a new idea for the design of his apparatus; but he had not been seeking for it. He had only gone out to his workshop because, when once he had brought the doctor, there was nothing more for him to do, and he could not have stood the chatter of Mrs. Wilson and Mrs. Ames. And, then, Coral had taken him utterly aback by proposing to call the little girl Jenny. Of course, he ought not to have refused the name as roughly as he had. He should have said: "We'll talk about that," or "we'll see about it when you are stronger." Yet, her suggestion had been such a shock to him that he had very nearly blurted out the truth about Coral's father. Time after time Frank was on the point of going upstairs and telling Coral that he had not meant to be unkind. He would have done so, if the doctor had not laid such stress upon her resting.

"After all, she's kept her promise, and she's done her best, and perhaps I have been a bit hard with her. Never mind. I'll make it up to her now. I wish auntie had never told me about anything. Though, I suppose, if she hadn't I wouldn't never have had the nerve to marry Coral. And whatever her father done, she's all right."

Frank fell asleep on this thought; but he woke very early to a tremendous realization of how completely Coral now belonged to him. He jumped up, and, lighting a candle, went upstairs on tiptoe. Outside the door of Coral's room he waited, listening. Surely that was a deep sigh. He opened the door gently and beheld her lying there white and wide-eyed.

Coral

"Coral, I didn't mean to be unkind when I came up before. I think I was all fussed over you."

"Oh, darling," she murmured, lifting a welcoming arm.

He knelt beside her now without any embarrassment, and she drew his head down to her warm breast.

CHAPTER XLVII

THE LOVERS' CALENDAR

THE impulse of Frank to go upstairs on that dark and frigid January morning was the beginning of months of happiness for him and Coral. The coming of Iris (thus was the baby girl christened after many discussions in which the name of Jenny was never mentioned again) gave the father the self-confidence he had always lacked, and the want of which had always made him so assertive. Until now he had always been on the look out either for laughter or disapproval or sneers over his marriage. He had always felt the necessity of challenging the world's opinion by offering it the spectacle of a wife who did not consider herself superior to her husband, a wife in a state of perfect submission. Everything he said or did was directed to emphasize the fact that he was the loser by the alliance. But now with this baby girl, what did the opinion of the world matter? Let it, if it would, think him beneath the woman he had married. At least it would understand now that she did not think him beneath her. The dourness that he had inherited from his father vanished, and its place was taken by his mother's joy in life, which made Coral more in love with him than ever now, and which, could he but have realized it, had all those years ago made Coral's father so deep in love with Jenny.

Early one fine morning in the front of May, the baby woke up and cried so loudly that she wakened both her

Coral

parents, and so effectually that neither of them felt inclined to go to sleep again when at last she was quiet.

Frank pulled up the blind, so that they might sit on the window-sill and gaze out at the apple tree, which broke in a foam of rose and white against the walls of the cottage. The sun was not yet up for Frank and Coral; but high in the faded blue sky of the morning the wings of the swallows were already glinting in the first rays.

"You've not done much work on your invention lately," Coral said in a low voice, so that baby should not wake up again.

"I haven't felt so interested in it lately," Frank acknowledged. "You know, you'll think me silly, but I've been so blessed proud of this kid of ours that I've sort of felt it wasn't worth while trying to make something which couldn't be so good as that, not however hard I tried."

"Not even when she wakes you up before sunrise?" Coral laughed.

"Oh, well, I like to hear her kick up a row," Frank declared. "It makes you feel she's alive."

"But you will go on with your work, dearest? I shouldn't like to feel that family life had taken away all your ambition."

"Oh, I'll get on with it right enough presently. But, I don't know. This fine weather makes me just want to enjoy it. Before the kid came, I'd have thought how much prettier a cloud would be to look at instead of all that apple blossom. But just for the moment I'm enjoying this old earth, and the fewer clouds I see the better I'll be pleased. Come on, Coral, the kid's gone fast asleep again. Let's go down and walk in the garden. I sowed some more runner-beans last week. Let's go and see if they're up yet."

The Lovers' Calendar

"I suppose we should hear baby if she woke up and cried again?" Coral asked.

"Hear her? Good lord, I should think we should hear her. What? You can hear the lions in the Zoo, can't you?"

So they went downstairs and out into the little garden to look at Frank's beans; but as soon as they were outside among the sweet morning scents and the birdsong they forgot all about the beans, and stood entranced by the beauty of the hour beneath the apple blossom.

"My sweetheart," Coral murmured, for even as the quivering rays of the risen sun made warm with life the blossom, so her cheeks were kindled to a richer hue of rose by Frank's deep, slanting eyes. "My sweetheart, hold me close. Ah, so close, so close."

"Coral," he whispered, "it's not that I don't love you, because I'm not always talking about it. What would be the good for me to talk about it? I've not read enough books to talk about love. Why, you'd laugh if I started in to talk about love."

"Dearest, if only you'll look at me for ever as you are looking at me now, you'll tell me all I ever want to know on earth. Ah, my dear, such dazzling, deep blue eyes, and oh, such red, red lips!"

"Coral, I *am* sorry I was so selfish that day I made you walk all that way to see me make a fool of myself."

"Ah, don't think any more about it, my precious, foolish one. What does anything matter except that you love me and that I love you, and that at last you understand how utterly I do love you?"

A blackcap on the topmost bough of the apple tree began to warble. A whitethroat slipped along the privet hedge, whispering his shy snatch of song as he went. A thrush ran quickly down the path to snap up a ruby-red

Coral

worm, but suddenly forgot all about his appetite and sang instead. The bees were buzzing round the wine-dark columbines. Amid such music they kissed. Amid such music each held the other close.

"Could you fly higher than this?" she whispered, breathless and tremulous.

All the warmth of the morning was in his eyes, and all the flowers of May were on her lips.

"Well, if I could, I don't want to," he whispered back.

And when May was gone with her apple blossom, June came in and flung a tangle of honeysuckle over the latticed porch where they used to sit in the long, fragrant twilights and watch the flittering bats, while Frank held Coral's hand, and only very seldom speculated upon the suitability of the bat's wings for his machine. The lilies of July and the green apples of August found them still happy; and if the red flowers of the beans sown in May were all pulled off by mischievous sparrows, the red cheeks of Iris were a triumph much more satisfactory. Yes, by September Iris was as plump and velvety as one of the fat double dahlias, with which Mrs. Ames had presented the young couple. And in October, when Frank and Coral were eating the apples beneath whose blossom they had stood upon that golden morning of May, they were still as happy, not minding a bit that summer was gone, and only thinking how cosy it was to sit by the fireside while Iris slept in her cradle, and while the kettle sang instead of the birds, and the wind booming round the cottage swept from their apple tree the last yellow leaves.

When Christmas drew near Coral had the excitement of choosing a present for Iris, and she was filled by a sudden hope that Frank would consent to her writing home.

"Darling, we've been so marvellously happy all this

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year, won't you release me from my promise and let me write and tell my father how happy I am?"

"The happiness will soon come to an end if you do that," he prophesied.

And she saw by the expression of his face that it was useless to argue with him. His refusal, though it could not altogether spoil this first Christmas with Iris, did worry her; and then on the morning after Iris's first birthday Frank came in with a dead owl which he had found by the edge of the coppice.

"Look at this wing, Coral," he cried. "That's the design for my wings. I'm bothered if it isn't."

"You're going to begin work again," she said. "I'm so glad."

But in her heart she did not feel so glad; and that dead owl which he had brought into the house seemed to her of ill-omen to their future.

CHAPTER XLVIII

FRANK LOSES HIS JOB

FRANK threw himself into his work again with such complete absorption that Coral was left alone by the fireside every evening, while out in the shed he was hammering and sawing until sometimes long after midnight. All this year, owing to the happiness they had found in each other's company, housekeeping had seemed to move along with perfect ease, and this ease had owed a great deal to the fact that Frank had not wanted every halfpenny that he could raise for his material. Now that he was again in the throes of experiment he began to find once more that Coral was extravagant. He even suggested that she was spending too much on Iris, which was the cruellest wound he had given her. She asked herself in despair if she had caused this revulsion by her desire for a Christmas reconciliation with her people, or if the dead owl was to blame. She did not yet understand that the creative temperament could not rest indefinitely in the contemplation of its last achievement, and that nothing she could have said or done, nothing that she could have refrained from saying or doing, would have prevented Frank's fresh absorption in his work when the time of quiescence was exhausted. The owl's wing was the occasion not the cause. She did not understand that fever which burnt in the thought that success was only just out of reach, nor did she reckon with that rage which sprang from the fancy that the mere cost of existence was standing in the way of a life's fulfilment. She did not

Frank Loses His Job

actually believe that her husband was the slave of a will-o'-the-wisp. She believed in his ultimate ability to discover what he sought; but with all her faith she was profoundly shocked by the apparent absence in him of any feeling of responsibility towards their child. She had always been depressed by her failure to keep house economically, and, though she might think that he did not make as many allowances for her as he might, she had never openly rebelled against his disapproval. But now with Iris, she rebelled every time that he remonstrated over what she deemed a necessity, he a luxury for the child of people in their circumstances.

During the present year Coral and Frank had lived such a secluded life together that she had become almost oblivious of being one of Sir Giles Amersham's people and an insignificant unit on a large estate. She had not wanted to be gossiping for an hour, now with Mrs. Wilson, now with Mrs. Ames; and Iris had always given her an excuse not to attend the occasional gatherings that were designed to lighten the dullness of rural life for the employees and their families. Consequently, when Frank once more devoted himself entirely to his work, Coral was left entirely alone, except for her year-old baby. Not that she was anxious for the company of Mrs. Wilson or Mrs. Ames or any other goodwife; but her isolation from everything was accentuated, and the weeks of rain and cold wind that always makes Easter seem so much farther off in March than Christmas seems in November passed slowly and heavily.

A by-election, for which Sir Giles Amersham had been prevailed upon to offer himself as Conservative candidate for a large lump of Wiltshire, kept Frank almost incessantly on duty with the car, and that, as he told Coral resentfully, at the very moment when he was nearer than he had ever been yet to perfecting his invention.

Coral

One morning in early April, a shrivelled morning of north-east wind and angry dust, Sir Giles knocked loudly on the cottage door.

"Where's Abel?" he demanded of Coral, as sharply as the wind that cut into the kitchen from behind him.

"I think he's working at the back, Sir Giles."

"Then, please call him at once and ask him why on earth he hasn't brought round the car."

Sir Giles's clean-shaven, florid face was crimson with cold and wrath, and the blue and white rosette in his button-hole gave him the look of a young bull that, having received a prize at a cattle show, is tired of being penned up any longer.

"I don't know what's come over your husband these last two months," he growled. "If you want him to keep his place, Mrs. Abel, I advise you to warn him that he is in danger of losing it. I've no use for wool-gathering chauffeurs. He's not drinking, is he?"

Coral tried to remember that for Frank's sake she must not answer Sir Giles as contemptuously as she wanted to, insolent though she thought his question, and more insolent his manner.

"He drinks nothing except water," she replied coldly.

"Well, are you and he getting on together? For certainly something's the matter with him. He's gone all to pieces."

"Really, Sir Giles, I cannot see that our private life has anything to do with my husband's driving, or"—she paused a moment—"or with you."

"It has this much to do with me, young woman, that unless Abel pulls himself together, and that precious quickly, he'll be dismissed from my service. Now go and fetch him."

For her husband's sake Coral paid attention to Sir Giles's command, and went out to find Frank leaning over

Frank Loses His Job

his bench, compasses in hand. He looked up irritably when Coral disturbed him, and when she explained the reason he scowled.

"What's he mean he ordered me to be round at ten? He told me he shouldn't want the car till two o'clock. I'm getting a bit fed up with Sir Giles Amersham."

Coral felt that she ought to urge prudence and self-restraint; but she had been so much exasperated herself by Sir Giles's manner of address that she could not help hoping that Frank would give him back as good as he gave. She followed him back to the cottage, the elation that precedes a row humming within her.

"What the deuce do you mean by not being round at ten with the car?" Sir Giles demanded.

"You told me two o'clock," said Frank firmly.

"Nothing of the kind. I said you were to drive Mr. Wallace into the committee-room this morning, wait for him in Trowbury, and come back for me not later than two o'clock to drive me into Newminster. I don't know what's the matter with you these days. You forget everything I tell you. You'd better pull yourself together, Abel, if you don't want to leave my service."

"There's no need to pull myself together in order to leave your service, Sir Giles. I can leave it of my own accord when I like, Sir Giles. So I'll save you the trouble of giving me notice by giving you notice."

"You're a fool," said Sir Giles.

"Not such a fool as I should be to stay here and be treated like one. When do you want us to clear out?"

"A damned fool," said Sir Giles.

"I'm willing to go to-day," Frank offered.

"*You* may be willing, but you've got your wife and child to consider," Sir Giles pointed out. "Even now I'd overlook your behaviour if you'd give me your word to do better in future."

Coral

"Thank you, Sir Giles, but I prefer to leave. I give you a month's notice. That'll see you through the election."

Sir Giles flushed.

"If you don't curb that tongue of yours, it'll get you into serious trouble one of these days," he warned him. "Chauffeurs are not hard to come by, and if I accept a month's notice from you instead of packing you out of the place neck and crop instantly, I do so because I don't like to let a silly fellow like you make a nice wife suffer for his silliness. Now get along with you and be quick with the car, because Mr. Wallace is being kept waiting all this time."

When Frank came in for his tea late that afternoon Coral asked him if he should be sorry to go back to London. She was wondering to herself if the arrival of Iris would change Aunt May's attitude towards herself.

"We're not going back to London," Frank announced.

"Oh, you've made it up with Sir Giles? Well, I dare say you were right, my dear. I was rather dreading the effect of London on baby."

"No, I haven't made it up with Sir Giles; but I've taken a cottage on the downs. I'll be free for awhile."

"But what are we going to live on? "

"Oh, I've got a few pounds put away. Besides, it's only for a little time. I'll have this new design ready soon, and then we'll go up to London. But I want a place where I can do experiments without a crowd of fools staring at me all the time."

Coral's heart sank.

CHAPTER XLIX

THE COTTAGE ON THE DOWNS

THE cottage that Frank had chosen for the perfection of his great gift to mankind stood entirely remote from any other habitation by the side of the slanting green fosse-way up which he had dragged his wife sixteen months ago to see his first attempt at flight. It was by no means in good repair, and though a former tenant had tried to carve out from the shallow soil some kind of a garden, nothing remained of his efforts except a rank growth of nettles round the bare grey walls of the little building. Presumably it had once been the abode of a shepherd; but for several years now it must have stood empty, and Coral looked with dismay at the dust and dirt, at the plaster peeling from the walls and ceilings, and at the woodwork powdery with dry-rot.

"Well, we won't be here long," said Frank. "And it's only costing us half a dollar a week. You can't expect Buckingham Palace for that."

Coral felt like reminding him of his disgust when he had first seen their present cottage, but she refrained.

"And what about water?" she inquired.

"Ah, I thought you'd ask that," he said triumphantly. "Well, as it happens there's a rain-water cistern."

"But we can't drink rain-water."

"Why ever not?" he demanded indignantly. "Look here, Coral, it's not a bit of good you trying to nag me out of coming here, so you may just as well keep quiet. I tell you, it's only for a month or two at the most, and

Coral

it'll be May before we move in. Good lord, to hear you talk anybody would think we were the first people in the world to go camping in the summer."

"But what about provisions?"

"You can walk three miles once a week, can't you? And it's hardly three miles to the Trowbury Road, where you'll pick up the bus."

"And three miles back," she reminded him. "Three miles uphill all the way."

"Well, you can do that once a week."

"And can baby?"

"You've got the pram, haven't you?"

"Yes, but you can't expect me to push a perambulator up the fosseway in all weathers."

"But don't I keep telling you that we'll only be here for the summer. Perhaps no longer than the middle of June."

"It can be just as wet in June as any other time."

"Why can't you wait till it is wet before you start in grumbling? You know quite well that if you couldn't do it I wouldn't ask you to do it. I'd go myself."

"Yes, you say that now," Coral argued. "But you know how you resent anything that disturbs you in the middle of your work. If you had to go all the way to Trowbury, it would be a grievance against me for the rest of the week."

"I don't know whatever has come over you lately. All this year you've done nothing but grumble. If you had a bit of belief in me, you'd find everything a precious sight easier."

"Frank dear, I shouldn't be making all these objections on my own account. You know that. It's only that I'm worried about baby."

He turned on his heel and left her at this. And she knew in her heart that he had left her so abruptly to stop

The Cottage on the Downs

himself from crying out in exasperation that he wished there was no baby. She gave him credit for not wanting to wish that, and presently she began to blame herself for being tactless over the cottage. After all, it might be lovely up there on that deserted green downland with only larksong and distant sheep bells all day, and at night so still that you might fancy you heard the dewfall. It might be that Frank really was very close to the consummation of his ambition. It would be time enough to protest when existence in that little cottage really did become intolerable.

So Coral said no more ; and on a mercifully fine morning in May their last bit of furniture was lifted from the wagon, and the wagon itself went rumbling ponderously off down the fosseway. She felt in the elation of the sparkling weather that Frank and she were king and queen of the green world when the noise of the wheels gradually faded out until there was nothing left to break the thyme-scented hush, save the cheerful click of a stone-chat bobbing on the top of a juniper and the lispings of a gentle little breeze.

But in a moment all the magic was shattered by a terrific problem.

"Oh, Frank," she gasped, "what shall we do about baby's milk? I forgot all about it."

"Well, I didn't," he replied, and going indoors he came out swinging a can triumphantly.

"Yes, but other days? "

"It'll have to be fetched from Fivetree Farm."

"But that's three miles away."

"Of course, you've made up your mind to think everything's wrong, even though it is such glorious weather. Well, the more you grumble, the more you'll put me off what I'm trying to do. And the more you do that, the longer we'll be stuck up here, because I'm not going to

Coral

leave here till I've finished what I'm doing. So you may as well make the best of it."

If housekeeping had been difficult when they first came to Amersham Grange, it was much more difficult up here, and it was not made any easier by Frank's continually reminding her that they were now living on what he had saved, not on what he was earning. It was an extraordinary existence in every way, with only one mitigating feature from Coral's point of view, which was that the sun shone nearly all the time. Yet even that mercy was qualified by a persistent high wind from the east, which not only exacerbated Coral's nerves, but also enraged Frank, whose new wings it ruthlessly broke every time he tried them against it. Iris was cutting teeth, and her continual crying-fits were a further strain. On top of that there was the problem of her daily milk. Frank said she interrupted his work when Coral left her in his charge while she walked down to the farm. Coral asked him to fetch the milk himself, on which he declared that one day a week was enough to give up to domestic errands.

"Well, even if I could carry baby all the way down and all the way back," Coral protested, "I wouldn't, because it really isn't safe for the child."

So, condensed milk was substituted for fresh milk, and Coral was sure that Iris was growing thinner every day on such unnatural sustenance.

"You ought to have been able to feed the kid yourself in the beginning," Frank said critically.

"My dear boy, do you suppose that I didn't long to all those first months? Why criticize me now for something which you know perfectly well was not my fault? That has nothing to do with her looking poorly now."

This was the bitterest reproach Coral had had to suffer

The Cottage on the Downs

from Frank. She felt that it was directed against the whole class from which she came as well as against herself, and she was sure that he was calling himself a fool for having married such a degenerate creature.

So it went on all through the hard sunlight and harsh winds of May, and never was any month welcomed so gratefully as Coral welcomed the warmth and peace of June.

CHAPTER L

DEBTS

ALAS! the peace of June so eagerly welcomed by Coral was confined to the balmy weather. Iris's teeth troubled her more persistently than ever; Coral, through want of sleep, suffered from acute neuralgia; and, worst of all, Frank's new apparatus turned out a complete failure when he put it to the test. In spite of her anxiety to be sympathetic, Coral could not help feeling rather glad, for she supposed that now he would be content to leave this cottage and look for proper work again. She was disappointed. His failure only made him more bitterly determined than ever to try again. He spent some of what little money was left in buying a wretched single-barrelled shot-gun, with which he killed bird after bird in order to examine their wings.

"Frank, you'll drive me insane presently," Coral told him.

And, indeed, she was scarcely exaggerating. To sit all day in this lonely and squalid cottage (for, tried she never so hard, Frank always littered it up with his tools and jointed canes and strips of material) listening to no sound but baby's crying, punctuated by gunshots sometimes quite close, sometimes distant, was enough to break down anybody's nerves. Then Frank would come in and cut up poor little bloodstained birds and nail up all over the place, on the walls and on the doors, their outspread wings, until Coral decided that he was in danger of going

mad before she did. Perhaps she communicated her horror of feathers to Iris. Anyway, the little girl could not bear them, and her father would tease her by persuading her to stroke the wings until she would shriek in terror.

The ready money began to give out, but Frank declined to pay any attention to Coral's despairing questions what they were going to do. He was entirely occupied in trying to shoot a cuckoo, the flight of which had struck him as more suitable for his purpose than any with which he had yet experimented.

"I believe the little blighters laugh at me," he said angrily. "They're kicking up quite a different noise now."

"The nightingales and the cuckoos both get out of tune in June," Coral reminded him. "And you'd better be quick if you're going to get a cuckoo," she added, with a hint of malice, "for they'll all be gone presently. Then perhaps you'll be able to discuss the future like a reasonable being."

A crisis was reached some days after this when Frank asked Coral to go in to Trowbury for the weekly marketing.

"Aren't you afraid of my spending too much?" she asked.

"You can't spend very much," he replied grimly, "because I don't suppose any shop will give you tick for very much."

"Can you spare me the two shillings to pay the bus?" she asked.

"Well, if I do, it will mean that I shan't be able to buy myself any more cartridges."

"If you want cartridges, you can go in to Trowbury and buy them for yourself. I'm certainly not going to buy you any."

Coral

"You couldn't get tick for cartridges," he said regretfully.

"I'm delighted to hear it."

"Oh, well, if you're going to talk like that," Frank growled, "you can walk all the way in to Trowbury and back so far as I'm concerned."

With which he flung himself out of the room and left her.

Coral knew that she must either make the effort to go into Trowbury and take Iris with her, or collapse entirely. She chose the braver course; and, putting Iris into the perambulator, she set out. It was pleasant and easy pushing the perambulator down the long green fosse in the morning sunshine. Iris, too, was in a particularly smiling mood; and, having just learnt to say "Hark!" and hold up one solemn fat forefinger, she was continually finding new sounds to listen to, from the song of lark or linnet to the noise of grass swishing against the wheels of the perambulator. Even the daisies that from time to time her mother stooped to pluck and fling into her lap had to be listened to instead of, as usual, being smelt with a tremendous intake of baby breath.

When Coral reached the main road, however, and began to contemplate the prospect of the four dusty miles in front of her, and then the four dusty miles back after a tiring and crowded day in Trowbury, and finally that last three miles of pushing the perambulator, full of Iris and parcels, all the way up the fosse, her courage failed, so that when she was overtaken by the motor-bus, and the driver stopped with a cheery "Good morning," she could not resist getting in and letting the conductor store away the perambulator for her. Mrs. Wilson and Mrs. Ames, who were both on board, greeted her warmly.

"Well, you are a stranger," exclaimed the former. "Dear me, why I was only saying to Mrs. Ames yester-

day 'Whatever has become of Mrs. Abel?' I saw your husband in the bus a fortnight back, but he kept himself very quiet. Wouldn't hardly speak a word to nobody."

"You must be very miserable and uncomfortable up there in that cottage," said Mrs. Ames in a tone of sombre relish. "And my little baby's not looking at all well, poor little mite."

Whereupon she prodded Iris in the ribs, probably with the intention of playfully tickling her, but conveying an impression that she was testing her plumpness, like the witch in *Hansel and Gretel*. Iris recoiled and gazed at Mrs. Ames, her big blue eyes expressing an astonished and alarmed disgust.

"She's been cutting teeth," Coral reminded Mrs. Ames.

"Ah, I wish I could find the conscription dear old Doctor Waterlow gave me for a soothing-mixture," Mrs. Ames ejaculated. "I've got a whole drawerful of conscriptions at home, but I wouldn't like to risk giving you the wrong one, or I would."

The conductor came up at this moment and asked Coral for the fare.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said, "but I've left my purse at home. Will it do next week?"

"You'll excuse me, Mrs. Abel, but the last two weeks your husband didn't pay me, and I wouldn't say nothing about it—only it's a bit awkward for me with the boss."

Coral blushed scarlet.

"Oh, I'm awfully sorry. I'll see that you get the money to-morrow without fail."

"Well, if you would, I'd be much obliged, Mrs. Abel."

Mrs. Ames was exchanging a portentous shake of the head with Mrs. Wilson, and Coral nearly died of mortification.

Coral

It was worse in Trowbury, for in every shop to which she went the shopman took her aside and explained in a low voice that he was very sorry, but that until his little account was paid he really could not afford to give any more credit.

Finally, in desperation, she took her wrist-watch to the curiosity shop, and was successful in selling it for two pounds, with which she managed to get the week's provisions, buy one or two things for Iris, and pay the conductor what was owing. Then, bitterly humiliated and full of dreadful apprehension for the future, she sat without speaking to anybody in a corner of the motor-bus, wishing that she was at home, longing, even, for the lonely drag up the fosse, caring for nothing except to be out of reach of the curious eyes of these women who must all know that the shops had refused to serve her, and one of whom at least must have seen her through the window of the second-hand shop, and would by now no doubt have told her neighbours that Mrs. Abel had had to sell her watch.

From the other end of the bus Mrs. Ames's voice found its way along to Coral's ears :

"Mr. Oxted was telling me as the people who took Merryfield has moved in at last. He was wondering if they'd spend much money in Trowbury or if they'd send up to town for everything, and which he says is what the gentry usually does nowadays, more's the shame. He says they must be very rich, from what he hears, and certainly nobody as wasn't rich would have left a nice house standing empty all this time with a caretaker and his wife on board wages eating their heads off. Funny sort of a name! Aviary. Well, we had an aviary at Amersham when Sir Giles's mother was alive."

"Isn't that what they keeps birds in, Mrs. Ames?" inquired another woman.

Debts

"That's right, Mrs. Walters. Though, of course, some people keeps guinea-pigs or rabbits in theirs. Ames used to harden off his annuals in ours after her ladyship died."

Just then the motor-bus reached the cross-roads, and Coral alighted. She was careless of the critical eyes that marked her departure in the excitement of the news she had just heard.

CHAPTER LI

THE PROMISE

CORAL pushed the perambulator up the fosse, the westering sun throwing her shadow before her in giant size upon the golden-green hillside. She paid no heed to Iris's fat upraised finger and solemn adjurations to hark. She did not stop to gather daisies and fling them into her baby's lap. Her whole mind was concentrated upon one single burning desire, which was that Frank should release her from the promise she had given him not to communicate with her father. He must be reasonable. He must. He must. He could not expect her to suffer again what she had suffered in Trowbury to-day. He could not expect her to let him spend his days in shooting birds while there was no money in the house to pay their debts and buy food for Iris. He could not. He could not. His work must take second place for a time. He must be made to realize his responsibilities. He must. He must. And if he would not of his own accord release her from that promise, why, then, she should break it. She ought never to have allowed things to come to this crisis. She ought to have protested more firmly long ago. She ought to have known that there could not possibly be enough money saved to keep Frank in idleness all these weeks. She ought. She ought.

"My baby girl," she cried, "mother must have some money for you."

"Hark!" Iris whispered solemnly.

"Yes, hark to the pretty birdies."

The Promise

"Oh-oh-oh!" ejaculated Iris, listening in a rapture of wonderment to the cawing of rooks that, on the velvety air, floated up from the vale below. No song of angels could have held her in a sharper ecstasy of attention.

"Oh-oh-oh," she breathed again in a round-eyed, mystical delight. "Hark! Hark!"

"My baby girl, my baby girl, for you mother would break all the promises she had ever made."

Coral's shadow grew longer; the shadow of the perambulator grew taller. And the head of Iris was the head of a giantess upon that golden-green hillside. All sorts of new sounds held entranced that dear head which was so small in reality—the lowing of distant cows, the bleating of sheep, a railway whistle most remote, the chimes of a clock in a church tower, the hum of midges, the sibilant song of goldfinches flying past.

"My precious, what fun you do have listening, don't you?"

"Hark!" Iris whispered.

When, at last, Coral reached the cottage and found Frank waiting for her, she came straight to the point, all breathless as she still was from the steepness of the last part of the ascent.

"Frank, I've heard that my people have come to Merryfield at last."

"Ah, they have?"

"Yes, and I want you to release me from my promise. I want to go and see my father."

"I'll never release you from that promise," he vowed.

"Listen, my dear. I'm in deadly earnest. When I gave you that promise I expected that you would play the game on your side. But you haven't. Frank, how did you dare let me go into Trowbury to-day without a halfpenny when you knew that we had been living on credit all these weeks?"

Coral

He did look slightly abashed for a moment when she asked him this question so fiercely.

"Was there any trouble?"

"Oh, no trouble at all," she answered bitterly. "They only refused to serve me with anything in every shop we deal with. Why, even the conductor of the bus was doubtful if he could take the risk of trusting to my honour to pay him his fare. Luckily, I had my watch with me, and I sold it to buy food for the week and one or two things that baby wanted. But this can't go on. If I'd known the true state of affairs a fortnight ago, and you had given up this mania for working on your invention up here, I might have kept my promise. But it's too late now. I'm not going to take any risks. How you can behave as you are behaving when you have a child I simply don't understand."

"Why do you want to see your father?" Frank asked.

"I'm going to ask him to lend me some money to pay our debts in Trowbury and to send me enough every week to keep baby and myself, and I suppose, if you insist on not looking for proper work, I must add to keep you."

"Do you think that I would accept charity from your father?" Frank exclaimed. "Never! I'd starve first."

"You may starve, if you like, but baby shall not starve. I shall walk over to Merryfield to-morrow."

"You'd better not," he said.

"Frank, no threats will keep me from going. My mind is made up."

"I knew you'd never stick to your word of honour. Honour! I suppose you've forgotten the way you tried to crush me when I wondered if you'd keep your promise? 'My idea of a promise is something that *must* be kept.' Ha-ha!"

The Promise

"And sneers won't keep me from going, either. There's too much at stake."

"Suppose I said I would look out for a job?" Frank asked.

"But, my dear, you've left it too late. Of course, you might get a job in a week, but you might not, and I simply cannot go round Trowbury selling the few trinkets I have left while you are looking for a job. Besides, we have debts, and they must be paid. Do you think I will ever go through again what I went through to-day?"

"Coral, I advise you not to go to your father. I tell you that if you do you'll regret it. You didn't think anything about debts when we first came to Wiltshire. You didn't think anything then about selling your jewellery when you wanted all sorts of rubbishy bits of knick-knacks. I suppose you thought I never knew what you was doing?"

For a moment Coral was shaken by this reminder. But a moment later she stiffened at the thought that nothing she had said and nothing that she had done before Iris was born could be allowed to influence her actions now.

"I shall go and see my father to-morrow morning," she proclaimed deliberately. "I shall ask him to send me enough money week by week until you find another job. It will lie with you, Frank, how long I have to accept this money. You may be very sure that I shall not ask for a halfpenny from my father as soon as you can provide for your child."

"You'll be sorry if you do go," Frank said darkly.

Coral shook her head.

"But, I'm going, my dear."

CHAPTER LII

MERRYFIELD

MERRYFIELD lay about three miles beyond Amersham Grange, in the opposite direction to Trowbury. It was situated more immediately at the foot of the downs, so that instead of descending by the fosse Coral kept along the top when she set out next morning to visit her father. By following this road she came to the spot where on that March morning over two years ago Frank had fallen on his knees before her, and when she, loath to stand so far above him, had knelt and folded him to her heart. How passionately she had believed in the happiness of their future together! How utterly she had despised her father's conventional dismay!

"Do I still believe in the possibility of our ultimate happiness?" she asked now, standing solitary in that green desert. "Or have I decided that our marriage is a failure? And am I only thinking of the future of baby and myself together? Have I any faith left in Frank's genius? Do I love him any more?"

The first four questions floated away upon the little idle wind unanswered; but when Coral asked herself if she still loved Frank all the incalculable life that once made populous these grassy uplands seemed to rise from oblivion and shout in her ears a mighty affirmative. She was seized with a panic. She had offended nature. She had blasphemed her womanhood.

"Oh, yes, yes, I do! I do still love him," she cried aloud.

The reproachful dead sank back once more to their

Merryfield

eternal sleep. The little wind went lispig idly through the grass. Coral left the high ground and descended through beech woods until she entered the dark ilex grove that encircled Merryfield. Now that she was so near to seeing her father again she was dismayed by a number of paltry emotions and embarrassments. Who would open the door to her? Perhaps her father would be out, and a new maid would invite her to speak to Mrs. Avery, perhaps even show her in upon her mother unaware. At this prospect Coral nearly turned round and went back to Frank. What she ought to have done was to have written to her father and asked him to meet her in Trowbury. And if she turned back now Frank would think that she was frightened by his threats. In his present state of mind he was not fit for any kind of victory over her. It would only make him more aggressive. He would despise her weakness. He might not believe her if she went back and told him that she had not been to Merryfield, after all. Besides, she really must have money for the sake of baby. Everything must be sacrificed to that paramount necessity. Pride must go first, and last of all even happiness, could her action be paid for in no other way.

Coral was drawing near to the lawn that occupied so large a space on this side of the house. Her heart began to beat when she heard the sound of voices and laughter. She caught glimpses through the great holly bushes that bounded the ilex grove of white forms flashing on the bright air beyond like sunbeams on a stream. It must be Lucius and some of his friends. Why was he not up at Oxford. Perhaps term was over. Thud-thud! Thud-thud! Yes, they were playing lawn tennis. It must be Lucius and some friends. Coral did not feel that she could face the curious eyes of those young men. Besides, it would hardly be fair to Lucius, who would find it diffi-

Coral

cult to explain the sudden appearance of a sister whose name was probably never mentioned nowadays. Coral turned back into the grove and decided to skirt the garden until she could approach the house by the drive. To her immense relief she had no sooner emerged from the trees than she saw her father coming towards her, and within a moment or two she was in his arms.

"My dearest girl, where have you sprung from? Have you seen your mother?"

She told him breathlessly all the news about herself.

"You're living close by?" he repeated in bewilderment. "And you have a little girl?"

"Dearest father, and she is so sweet. I think she's going to be like me."

"You're thinner than you used to be," said Maurice Avery, looking at his daughter. "Are you sure that you're happy?"

"Oh, perfectly happy. But, father, we are very hard up. Frank has been so busy working at his invention ever since he left Sir Giles Amersham that he hasn't had time to look for another place. And he rather miscalculated our resources. And I wondered if you could see your way to make me a small allowance just to tide over the next month or two. I have a few little debts in Trowbury that I should like to pay. And I do want to buy Iris a few summer clothes."

"Of course I'll make you an allowance. You know how much I always wanted to do so. I think you treated me very unkindly, Coral, by never answering my letter."

"Frank hated the idea of taking your money. I think he was right," Coral said. "I couldn't help seeing his point of view. And I thought it would be better, after mother's letter, to keep out of the way. She seemed to feel the disgrace of my marriage so keenly."

Maurice frowned.

"Yes, but I don't think that what your mother wrote acquits you of having treated me very unfeelingly. But, Coral, I don't know why I'm talking like this. If you only knew, my dear child, how glad I am to have found you again. You must let me come up to your cottage and salute my granddaughter. A grandfather! What an unimaginable status!"

"I'd rather you didn't visit us just yet," Coral said. "Not just yet, father. You see, Frank is so tremendously busy—yes, I'd rather you waited a little while. You see, he doesn't yet know that you've come back."

Coral blinked unhappily at the lie, and sighed.

"Well, of course, my dear child, you know your own business better than I," her father said rather coldly. "How much money do you want?"

"Father, please don't ask me in that tone. If I suggest that it would be better if you didn't come and visit us just yet, it isn't because I'm not longing for you to see Iris. It's just that I don't want to take the risk of—of——" she broke off unable to go on because of the tears that choked her voice.

"Coral, my Coral, don't give way like that," he exclaimed in dismay. "I understand perfectly that you must have some good reason for discouraging my visit. Come along, come back with me, and we'll have a jolly talk over everything in my room. You haven't seen it yet. Do you remember when I was planning out all the decorations?"

"Father, don't!" she cried in an agony. "I only wanted to see you. I couldn't bear to see mother or Lucius until we are all friends again. I'd rather you didn't say anything about having seen me again. It was such luck finding you out here, and the time hasn't come yet for us all to be friends. But it will come. I'm sure it will."

Coral

"Yes, but you want this money, and I shall have to go and fetch it for you. I have about twenty pounds, I think, in my desk. Will that be enough for the moment?"

"Oh, yes, yes, plenty," Coral assured him.

"But if you want any more you'll let me know?" he urged.

"Indeed I will. And father, I'll wait for you just inside the wood out of sight."

"But really it is rather ridiculous that my daughter should come to the house like a wandering gipsy in a melodrama," he laughed wryly.

"I'd rather come like that. I feel like that. I am a gipsy nowadays."

"Coral, Coral, how you have changed in these two years! Tell me, on your honour, are you truly happy in this marriage?"

"Yes, indeed I am. Truly, truly," she avowed.

"Very well, then, I shall write to your husband and apologize for not having welcomed him more graciously into the family circle."

"Father, you're a dear. But please don't write just yet. Not for a little bit, anyway. I've a good reason for what I'm asking."

Maurice shook his head.

"If you hadn't assured me on your honour that you were happy, dear child, I should say that you were utterly miserable."

"Father! With Iris? Don't be so absurd."

"With Iris?" he repeated.

"And with Frank, too. Really. Really."

She begged him to go and fetch her the money, and while she sat on a fallen trunk in the dim grove of holm-oaks, waiting for him to return, she put down her head and wept passionately.

When her father came back he asked her why she had been crying, for at the sound of his crackling footsteps, though she had pulled herself together and stifled her sobs, she could not hide the tears that trembled on her lashes.

"Oh, just because it has been rather an emotional strain, meeting you like this."

"Well, I'm not easy about you. But—well, I've managed to rake together twenty-six pounds four shillings and twopence, and I don't believe there's another halfpenny in the whole of Merryfield. I picked the pockets of everybody."

They both tried to laugh, but the effort was not a success, and neither of them was at the moment sorry to part from the other. This meeting had been so poignantly unlike what they had prefigured in daydreams.

Coral got back to the cottage in the silence of noon, but the silence of the blazing hour was nothing beside the chill silence of abandonment within. There was no sign of Frank. And Iris . . . there was no Iris! The shrill buzz of a fly caught in a spider's web sounded horribly loud in this silence.

CHAPTER LIII

ALONE

CORAL's first idea was that Frank must have taken Iris with him while he went shooting. But there stood his gun in the corner. Or perhaps he had gone off to test his new wings and had taken Iris with him? She rushed out again into the blazing sunshine and looked all round the rolling downs, but there was not even a distant sheep to cheat her into a brief fancy that she could see them far away. Her next thought was the chalk-pit, and she ran fast in that direction; but when she reached it and looked over the edge there was nobody. Barren and hot and white, it baked in the sun, empty even of butterflies. Coral stood up and called Frank by name. There was no reply. She wandered in ever-widening circles over the downs, calling in vain. Then, exhausted by her emotion, she collapsed upon the aromatic turf and tried to tell herself that she was being foolish. Frank must have wanted something in Trowbury, and had had to take Iris in with him, because she herself had not come back to relieve him of his charge. Had the perambulator been in the cottage? Coral hurried back to find out, buoying herself up as she went with the hope that he had left a note telling her where he had gone, some little scrap of paper which in her anxiety she had failed to notice.

When she reached the cottage again she found that the perambulator had vanished, and, though she could not find any note, she felt less worried. Frank must have taken Iris in to Trowbury. He

had required some new tool in a hurry. Yes, that must be the explanation. Yes, yes, it must be. She had simply got to pull herself together and absolutely make up her mind that there could not be any other explanation. Why, even at this moment they might be alighting from the one o'clock bus, and she had not made the slightest attempt to cook the dinner. She set about the preparations, listening all the time over her shoulder for a familiar voice to break the blazing silence outside. Half-past one already. She wondered if she might leave the stew and watch for them to appear at the bottom of the fosse. Frank would realize now what it meant to push baby and the perambulator all the way up here. The stew looked quiet enough, but food that was being cooked did behave so oddly sometimes. Would the stew have a sudden fit of restiveness if it were left, and stew itself right away? Coral had never yet learned how to manage her dishes. She was still as nervous over their queer little noises and sudden bubblings as she would have been if left in charge of a chemical laboratory in which a dozen simultaneous experiments had been started. Perhaps it would be wiser to put the stewing-pan out of mischief on the hob. It might, of course, simmer everlastingly, but, on the other hand, it might not. She should not feel at ease outside with the thought of a possible Vesuvius in her kitchen.

Two o'clock came, and half-past, while Coral sat straining her eyes for the sight of Frank's return. The vale below appeared through a flickering and syrupy haze of heat, but she could see clearly enough that nothing which moved down there was he whom she sought. She went back at last to the cottage, reassuring herself with the theory that Frank had had some difficulty in finding what he wanted and so would not now come home till the six o'clock bus. It was naughty of him to keep baby

Coral

out so long on this hot June day. The stew looked very unappetizing. She began to fret over what Frank might have let Iris eat. It really was naughty of him to keep her out like this. She decided that the best thing to do would be to lie down and rest till after tea-time. Then she could go and meet the bus at the cross-roads.

Her attempt at repose was not a success, such a steeplechase her thoughts rode through Coral's mind all that afternoon. She knew that there lay before her a difficult task to convince Frank that she had been justified in breaking her promise; but as fast as she mustered the arguments she should use, they wriggled away from her control, assuming fantastical and elusive forms that mocked her resolution. She was glad when it was time to go downstairs and make herself a cup of tea, and gladder still when she was on the way along the fosse, walking into the sun's eye, her shadow flung behind.

But when the bus drew up at the cross-roads it deposited only Mrs. Ames instead of Frank—Mrs. Ames, very red and very hot, and carrying so many paper bags that she looked like the old woman who used to sell balloons by one of the gates of Kensington Gardens. Coral did not enjoy the idea of showing Mrs. Ames that she was anxious, but she had to ask her if she had seen Frank.

Such an occasion for pessimism went far towards consoling Mrs. Ames for the discomfort she had suffered all day from the heat.

"No, I didn't see him, Mrs. Abel. In fact, I didn't see not a blessed soul in Trowbury. Perhaps he was took bad with the heat and had a stroke of applepexy and got carried to the cottage hospital. There's been several deaths, I was reading in the papers, all over England through this heat wave. Well, I wouldn't have been surprised if I'd dropped down dead on the pavement my-

self. I give you my word I felt as if I'd no more life in me than a grilled tomato, and the presspiration was running down my face in cataracks. But it is a nuisance you not knowing where your husband is. I wish I'd only heard he was missing before the bus left. I'd certainly have popped in to the hospital and inquired if he was there. And how's my baby—well, I always call her my baby, because I always say if it hadn't have been for me she'd never have been born at all, poor little mite."

"Baby's fairly well. She's with my husband. That's why I was a little worried about them both."

"Well, and so you ought to be. Fancy your little girl trapesing about all day in this blazing heat! Why, if I was you I'd be a ravenous lunatic. I would indeed. Oh dear, oh dear, the poor mite 'll come back in a bath, get double-pumonia, and . . . Ah well, I mustn't keep you standing about here, for I'm sure you must be on twenty hooks to know the worst. Of course, if you walked in to Trowbury you might get a lift in, but then you might not; and you might get a lift back, but there again more likely as not you wouldn't. Well, I must be getting back to see to Ames's tea. That man eats like a mammoth in spite of the hot weather. Good evening, Mrs. Abel. I only hope you won't find nothing very serious has happened to your little girl. Or your husband, if it comes to that."

Coral did not know what to do. If Frank had not gone into Trowbury after all, and was by now back in the cottage, he would suppose that she was still at Merryfield. He would be in such a rage with her that any chance she might have had of persuading him that she had acted for the best in going to her father would be destroyed.

"Oh, what shall I do?" she asked aloud, and the signpost that directed the wayfarer to so many different

Coral

towns and villages stood like a derisive skeleton mocking her perplexity.

In the end she decided to return to the cottage, and as she walked up the fosse she began to tell herself that she should be sure to find Iris and Frank at home by now. She was too hopeful. The golden rays of the westering sun streamed through the lattices of the kitchen and bedizened the cold and half-cooked stew; but the cottage was still as empty as when she left it.

CHAPTER LIV

A JUNE NIGHT

THE sun went down that evening in such a splendour of crimson that the small clouds in the eastern sky were turned to bunches of malmaisons out of which floated the pale and immaterial beauty of the full moon.

Still Frank did not come home with Iris.

Coral tried to drive away the thought that was beginning to torment her imagination; but like a bat it came flitting back each time she fancied it was gone. Could Frank really have had the heart to leave her and to take baby with him? Was it conceivable? No, no, no. He could not be so cruel. And then the bat would come back, flitting across the face of the ivory moon, flitting away toward the primrose west, flitting back toward the stone-blue east again.

"He could not leave me without a word."

The bat came flitting from the slaty east, flitting across the face of the golden moon, flitting back into the green west again.

East and west the sky was sapphirine and the moon true silver before Coral heard Frank's quiet footsteps on the shimmering grass.

"My darling," she cried, running toward him, "where have you been?" Then she stood frozen in the moonlight. "Where's baby?" And her voice did not sound like a voice. The question fell from her lips as a dead leaf falls from the tree in frost.

"Come inside and I'll tell you."

Coral

"Frank, she's not—she's not dead?"

"Of course she isn't dead. Come inside."

She followed him without another word, and a minute or two later they faced each other in the hot lamplight.

"Listen," Frank said. "I warned you, didn't I, not to break your promise? You broke it. You wouldn't listen."

"I broke it for baby's sake," Coral said, praying within herself that she might keep control of her temper.

"Just so," Frank continued. "Well, I've taken the kid away. Perhaps that'll learn you that you'll never do yourself a bit of good by breaking promises. You wanted money to buy food and clothes for the kid? Right. I've taken her where she'll be well looked after."

"Where have you taken her?"

"I took her to London and asked auntie to look after her till we was able to have her back."

"How dared you do that, Frank?"

"How dared I? You went to your relations, didn't you? Right. I went to mine. If you can borrow from yours, I reckon I've got a right to borrow from mine. You seem to forget that the kid is as much mine as yours."

"A child of that age belongs to her mother, and to her mother only," Coral declared, still praying hard within herself that she might keep control and not utter unforgivable things.

"Not if the mother does wrong to the father," said Frank obstinately.

"What wrong have I done you?"

"You broke your solemn word."

"I broke my word on account of your unreasonable behaviour. I broke my word because a mother would be wicked to keep such a promise at the expense of her child's health."

A June Night

"Just so. That's what I'm saying, isn't it?" Frank interrupted. "That's exactly why I've taken the kid where she will be properly looked after. I warned you not to go to your father. You thought I was just talking. Well, I wasn't. Now perhaps you've had your lesson. Perhaps you know now that you've married somebody who isn't going to be fooled about by his wife, not even if she is a lady and him beneath her?"

"Yes, I suppose I have had my lesson," Coral agreed. "But, Frank, you've not had yours. It would be a waste of time to argue with you in your present state of mind. It would be a waste of time to try to show you how hopelessly and utterly you're in the wrong. There's only one way I can teach you."

"Oh, and what's that?" Frank asked, with a little smile.

"By leaving you," she said quietly.

He flushed.

"If you leave me, Coral, you'll leave me for good and all."

"That rests with you. If you can live without me, my dear, it's better by far that you should."

"I suppose when you got back to your home and saw how rich and comfortable everything was," Frank sneered, "you began to think you'd made a mistake in marrying beneath you. I suppose you made up your mind that as soon as you could you'd find an excuse to go back to your family?"

"No; I have no wish to live at home. I intend to earn my own living."

He laughed.

"As a cook, I suppose?"

"Frank, I'm very human, you know, and if you talk like a cad I shan't be able to keep control of my tongue."

Coral

"Well, you see, I wasn't educated like you was. You'll have to excuse my bad manners," he jeered. "But don't let me keep you if you want to start in earning your living. Only when you've found you can't earn your living quite so easy as you think, you needn't fancy you can come back to me just when you like. Earn your own living! What rot you talk, Coral! Why, in a week you'll be living at Merryfield, and you know that. You know as well as I do that all this talk and chatter is nothing but an excuse. I wonder you don't go back home to-night. I would if I was you."

She turned and left him, for she feared that if she listened to him talking like this she might turn upon him and say such things about their love that whether he forgave her or not she should never be able to forgive herself. And that would mean the death of their love.

Upstairs in the bedroom she pondered the problem of her luggage. Her heart softened toward Frank when she realized that he had packed all baby's clothes; but a moment afterward the imagination of baby crying for her mother in that dark little house in Dairymaids Row hardened it again. She wondered if Frank would try to stop her going to-morrow morning when he saw that she was in earnest. Her trunks would be a problem if he did. He must know that she intended to take baby away from his aunt. Or did he really believe that she was planning to return to her family? If he really wanted to stop her going he would refuse to let her take her trunks. Oh, well, if he did that, she should leave her trunks behind her. She heard Frank go out. Perhaps when he had walked for awhile in the moonlight he would come in sorry for what he had done. He could not really be so unmoved as he pretended by this breaking up of their married life. But she must not count on a

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change of heart. She must be brave and begin her packing.

Frank did not come upstairs until Coral's two trunks were finished and she herself was in bed. He did not speak, nor did he light the candle that he might look at her; and in the moony radiance that filled the room they lay beside each other like the cold shadows of themselves.

CHAPTER LV

A JUNE MORNING

CORAL rose at dawn and dressed herself so quietly that she supposed she had not wakened Frank. She was wrong. He had been watching her all the time from under his eyelids, and it had been as much as he could do not to cry out and beg her not to leave him. The sight of Coral in her long nightgown all sprayed and spangled with glinting light brown hair, her cheeks lilyrosed by sleep, moving about that low room, now seeming taller than mortal women and now in the faint light of dawn appearing imponderable as some fair ghost, made him sharply aware of what he was losing. He wanted to kneel before her as once on these very downs he had fallen upon his knees in worship of her beauty; but his pride forbade him to make such a surrender. Yet, could he but shake himself free from this black enchantment, she would, he knew, turn back and take him in her arms again. If he did not put out a hand to detain her, if from his heart he did not cry to her to stay, she would pass perhaps for ever beyond his reach, even beyond his ken. He had but to make a gesture; yet pride fettered his limbs. He had but to whisper "Coral"; yet pride clutched his throat. "She may think herself a blooming goddess," he told himself sullenly. "But that's no reason why I should think her one. Besides, if I give in now, she'll think that she can lead me round the world on a bit of string."

All this time Coral, quite unconscious of the struggle

A June Morning

going on in Frank's mind, was thinking wistfully how easy he was finding it to sleep calmly on this morning which might be the end of their love. Once or twice she was tempted to wake him and, swiftly folding him to her heart, conquer the hardness of his heart by a sudden sweet surprise. Had he stirred but a brief instant from his apparent tranquillity, she might have yielded to that impulse; but he stirred not, and she turned her mind to the achievement of her purpose.

Since the first thing to be done was somehow to get her trunks to the railway-station, Coral decided to walk down to Fivetree Farm and persuade Mr. Reeves to let one of his carters come back with her and drive the luggage to the cross-roads to await the morning bus.

The sun, topaz-hued, was flashing above the rim of the downs when Coral, in a flowered muslin frock, came out of the cottage-door and stood for a moment entranced by the vision of that luminous and wine-gold world of morning. In spite of her sadness she could not help feeling exhilarated by the beauty of the scene, and as she went swinging down the fosse neither the birds nor the rabbits scattered in alarm at her approach, so natural was her presence here. She did not know that Frank watched her from the window of the room until her chip-hat trimmed with roses had vanished below the brow of the hill. Had she known, she might have turned from nymph to woman, and sent the birds fluttering into the sky and the rabbits scampering to earth at the approach of a mortal.

Mr. Reeves was not sure at first if he could spare the carter from the haymaking.

"You couldn't have asked me at a more awkward time, Mrs. Abel."

"But my husband had to take my little girl up to London yesterday, Mr. Reeves." Coral hesitated. The

Coral

lie she was meditating seemed like a challenge to fate. "She's ill, and I must go to her this morning. Oh, Mr. Reeves, if you possibly can, do please let your carter fetch my things. They're all ready now, and he could come at once, and I'll wait with them at the cross-roads in the bus."

"Well, you're a mighty difficult young woman for a man to refuse a small favour. All right. Harris!" he shouted, "put the black mare in the cart, and go up to Mrs. Abel's cottage and leave her luggage at the cross-roads."

"Oh, Mr. Reeves, you are kind. I can't thank you enough."

"That's all right, Mrs. Abel."

"I hope your hay will be a success."

"No, 'tis poor. That dry month of May spoilt it. Too much of that darned east wind."

Coral nodded. That wind had withered more than grass. But next May the grass would grow tall and green again, and love might still be withered.

When Frank saw the cart coming up the fosse, he took his gun and strode away out of sight across the downs. He did not intend any eyes to watch his parting with Coral, nor any tongue to carry the news of it to the gossips in the vale below.

It was not until Coral was in the train and saw the green downs receding, and the Trowbury Giant growing smaller and smaller, that she began to ask herself what she really intended to do in London. It was imperative that she should earn her own living. Were she simply to take Iris away from Aunt May and seek refuge in her father's house she would destroy irremediably any chance of a reconciliation with Frank. That was absolutely certain. Besides, he might claim Iris on the ground that his wife had deserted him. No, she must not go

A June Morning

either to Merryfield, or even to the family house in Westminster. Luckily she had the money her father had given her, and if she could only think of a way to make some more before that was exhausted . . . why not give dancing-lessons? She had always been told by her men friends that they considered themselves better dancers after dancing with her. She might rent a small studio somewhere, and put an advertisement in *The Times*. But before anything else she must find a room for herself and Iris. Of course, if the worst came to the worst, she could always ask her father for more money. No doubt he would be quite willing to set her up in a really charming studio and make her an allowance until she had enough pupils to be independent. But that would mean that she would have to admit that her marriage had been a failure. Yes, she must at all costs avoid that. The worst would have to come to the very worst before she did that.

Coral left her luggage in the cloak-room at Paddington, and resisted the temptation to take a taxi to Islington. It would not be so very much longer on a bus. The heat and noise of London bewildered her after all those quiet months, and she suddenly realized that she had had nothing except a cup of tea since she woke at dawn. She decided that she must be prudent and sensible, and in spite of her impatience to see Iris she went into an A.B.C. shop and ate a poached egg.

It was barely eleven o'clock when she reached the little house in Dairymaids Row. While she waited for the door to open, her breath came fast, for she could hear Iris crying inside.

CHAPTER LVI

DAIRYMAIDS ROW AGAIN

THE sound of Iris's crying filled Coral with rage that the little thing should have been made to suffer needlessly like this, and she had to make a considerable effort of self-control to greet Aunt May with any good will. She had to remind herself that the only person to blame was Frank, and that his aunt was entirely innocent in the matter. Of course, if Aunt May should make the slightest opposition to her taking Iris away, all the indignation she felt would at once be visited upon her.

The door opened slightly, and Aunt May peeped cautiously out at the visitor, like some timid little woodland creature before it leaves the protection of its hiding-place.

"Oo-er!" she exclaimed. "Why, it's Coral! Fancy seeing you!"

"I've come up to take baby. What is she crying for, Aunt May?"

"She hasn't stopped crying not since Frank left her here yesterday. I never knew such a kid. Frank himself was never like that."

But Coral, paying no attention to the imputation upon herself, hurried past Aunt May, and picked up Iris from where on the floor she sat weeping amid the rejected diversions offered by her aunt to distract her grief.

"My baby girl, did you want mother?"

"Mamma," she sighed contentedly, laying her head against her mother's shoulder.

Dairymaids Row Again

"Fancy," May said. "Well, there's no doubt she knows you, that's certain."

She spoke as if Iris was an unusually intelligent kitten.

"She's never been away from us before," Coral said indignantly.

"Well, I must admit I was a bit surprised when Frank came up yesterday and asked could I take charge of little Iris for a bit because he had some work he wanted to finish and not be disturbed."

"Is that what he said?" Coral exclaimed. "Well, if you want to know the true reason why he brought Iris to you, it was to punish me for going to see my father."

"And I don't blame him," May said quickly. "I don't blame him not at all. If you knew what I know, you wouldn't blame him either."

"Why, what do you know?"

"Let Frank tell you himself when it suits him," said May. "I did my best to stop him ever marrying you, but he wouldn't listen to me, and I'm not going to start interfering now. Small thanks you get in this world for trying to stop people from being mad."

It did not strike Coral that her aunt was in the possession of any important secret that might justify Frank's behaviour. She merely supposed that she was giving vent to her old jealousy, and the opportunity for an explanation was allowed to slip.

"There isn't the slightest need to discuss the rights or the wrongs of the situation," Coral said. "I could not dream of allowing Iris to be anywhere except with me, and so I have left Frank in Wiltshire until he finds another job which will enable him to support his wife and child."

"And what are you going to do?" May asked.

"I'm going to earn my own living meanwhile."

Coral

"Earn your own living? Whatever at?"

"I thought I'd give dancing-lessons," Coral said.

"You leave dancing alone," May said fiercely. "Dancing begun all the trouble in our family. Besides, how can you give dancing-lessons when you was never taught dancing? You've got to start when you're quite small, like my sister Jenny did."

"But that was stage dancing. I should give lessons in ballroom dancing," Coral explained.

"And when are you going to commence?"

"As soon as possible. I'm going to look for a room this afternoon."

"Listen," said May abruptly. "I was always against Frank marrying you, and I shall always say he made the biggest mistake of his life to go and do it. Still, though perhaps you and me haven't hit it off too well, and which isn't surprising, I believe you've tried to do your best, and if you've made a bit of a hash of it I expect it's not so much your fault as the way you were brought up. There's no need for you to go looking for a room outside of Dairymaids Row. You and the kid can stay with me as long as you like, and if you want to give dancing-lessons—well, if you can find anyone who wants to be taught by you, good luck to the lessons. You can have your old room, and you can have Frank's old bed before he was married; and if Frank kicks up a fuss about me keeping you here, I'll argue it out with him myself that he ought to get proper work, and not stay down in the country earning nothing when he's got a wife and child."

Coral hesitated a moment or two before she refused this offer. Yet how could she accept it? After all, it had been at her prompting that Frank had given up his job in London and taken another in the country. If he heard that she was installed in Dairymaids Row he

Dairymaids Row Again

would probably come back, and then life in the future would just be a repetition of two years ago. Indeed it would be worse, because Frank would always taunt her with broken promises, and Aunt May would scarcely be able to avoid being a little triumphant.

"It's very kind of you," Coral said. "But I'd rather that any money you can spare at present went to Frank while he's out of work. You couldn't afford to send him money and keep Iris and myself here. Suppose I didn't succeed in getting any pupils, I have a little money of my own which will keep me at any rate for a month or two. So, thank you very much, Aunt May, but I'd rather be independent. And really it is important that Frank should have a little money, for he hasn't a half-penny at the moment."

Coral saw that the suggestion pleased her aunt, for she asked almost brightly what part of London Coral thought of living in.

"I'd thought of Paddington. It looked very cheap. But it'll depend a bit where I can get a studio."

As soon as Iris saw her mother preparing to leave her again, she began to cry.

"Darling, mother won't be long. She'll come back very soon to her little girl."

But Iris screamed more loudly.

"Come and play with your nice puffer," Aunt May invited her, winding up a clockwork engine.

But Iris swept it from her hand in a fury of despair.

"Oh, darling, that's not being kind to Auntie May. Poor puff-puff!"

"I bought her the puffer yesterday, and she hasn't taken a bit of interest in it," said Aunt May. "Now her father—well, give him a puffer when he was a little boy, and he'd stay quiet for hours. Anything with wheels to poke about with, and he was as happy as a king."

Coral

"I'm afraid Iris takes after her unpractical mother," Coral said. "Baby, darling, don't go on crying. Mother will come back soon."

"If you wanted rooms in Islington," said May, "you could take her in the pram, and I'd come with you."

It did not strike Coral that her aunt made this suggestion a little wistfully, or she would hardly have disposed of it so decidedly.

"Oh, no, thank you very much, Aunt May, but I'm sure Islington wouldn't be at all a good place to open a dancing-studio."

"I was thinking I could have kept an eye on the kid," May murmured half to herself.

"Yes, but it would be foolish to go to the extravagance of taking a room elsewhere unless it was more convenient in every way. Of course, if I can't find anything suitable to-day, we shall have to inflict ourselves on you to-night."

Away from Frank Coral was unconsciously re-assuming the characteristic manner of Miss Avery, had Miss Avery been wishing to make herself particularly polite to a well-meaning country dressmaker. The strange thing was that May Raeburn did not appear to resent it, possibly in her case because Frank was not present, or perhaps because she did not wish to lose all her rights and privileges in Iris.

"You can stay here to-night and to-morrow night and the next night, if it comes to that. Perhaps young Iris 'll be a bit more used to her Auntie May by then."

This, too, was uttered wistfully.

But Coral did not observe the tone, and having managed to quieten Iris, set out to find a lodging for them.

CHAPTER LVII

INKERMAN VILLAS

It was by no means easy for Coral to find a room. Her own appearance was received ambiguously enough at several houses where she called; but when she mentioned that she was proposing to bring a child of eighteen months, a curt refusal and a slammed door was the invariable response. At last, however, when she was on the point of abandoning the search for that day, she discovered, if not exactly what she had fancied beforehand she should discover, at any rate a room and a studio in the same house. She had turned into Sebastopol Road, not so much in the hope of finding a room there as of crossing the Regent's Canal, with the circumvolutions of which she had become entangled once or twice in the course of her wanderings in the hinterland of Paddington. As it happened, Sebastopol Road was not even a thoroughfare, still less the approach to a bridge. It diverged abruptly at the bottom into a blind alley, where a row of five deteriorated habitations, known as Inkerman Villas, looked down over a black fence upon the grimy bank of the canal. A card hanging in the window of the last of these said *Furnished Apartments*, and Coral, attracted to the quietness of the situation, inquired within. The door was opened by a small woman with a red face and a snub nose, who said somewhat to her visitor's astonishment in a voice of the utmost cheerfulness :

Coral

"Yes, I'm Mrs. Kedge. Can I do anything for you?"

"I noticed you had a card in your window saying that you had apartments to let."

"There is?" Mrs. Kedge ejaculated. "Well, now there, that's our Tommy done that. What a young Bolshevy that boy is! Fancy him patching that window he broke yesterday with a To Let card, and me never know nothing about it. Well, there's one thing, it won't deceive nobody, only the barges going by, because nobody else ever passes along here. Turnback Corner, I say it ought to have been called."

"Then you haven't got a room to let?" Coral asked in a disappointed voice.

"Well, I certainly never hadn't thought of letting out a room. But now you mention it, I *have* a room, and which was got ready for my married daughter when we thought she was coming here to have her first, only she went to the West Injies instead."

Coral took this opportunity to reveal the existence and the age of Iris.

"There you are," Mrs. Kedge apostrophized triumphantly. "Why, the room might have been got ready for you. You'd better come inside and have a look at it."

It really was not at all a bad room, and the outlook over the canal was much pleasanter than most London views.

"You're sure you wouldn't mind having such a young child in the house?"

"Oh, no, I shouldn't mind at all."

"She's been rather fretful lately," Coral warned her.

"Well, I don't mind how much a child cries, I don't. I says it's good for the lungs, I do."

"But your husband," Coral began, and then stopped, afraid that she might be making a tactless remark.

Inkerman Villas

"Oh, Mr. Kedge won't mind. He's very used to children crying. He's in charge of the camel at the Zoo. Yes! And as he often says to me: 'Mother,' he says, 'some of 'em cries to get on and some of 'em cries to get off, and some of 'em's sick, what with the excitement and the wobbling of the hump.' Oh, I give you my word, Mr. Kedge pays no attention at all to a child crying."

"I wonder if you would be able to keep an eye on my little girl, Mrs. Kedge, while I'm at work? I'm a teacher of dancing—ballroom dancing. I suppose you don't know of any studio in the neighbourhood I could get fairly cheap?"

"Why, we've got a stujio ourselves at the back. Well, stujio I say, though I believe really it's more what you call a conservatory. Only, there was a photographer had this house before we took it, and that's where he had his sittings, till he went bust, poor fellow, and drowned himself in the canal. Yes, he tied himself up in a coal-sack one night and rolled over the bank. It created quite a stir at the time, because it was thought at first the Bolshevies done it."

Coral decided that in any case she would have to rely on advertisements, and that therefore her dancing studio's being so much out of the way of the public eye would not matter. Certainly, she should not find anywhere else a furnished room and a studio for fifteen shillings a week, the sum that Mrs. Kedge asked. It would be a relief, too, to feel that the presence of Iris was not resented, and altogether Coral was pleased with the result of her long and tiring afternoon.

"I should like to go and fetch my luggage now from Paddington, and also my little girl, who's with her aunt at the moment in Islington. My name is Mrs. Abel. But I think I shall call myself Madame Coral pro-

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fessionally. Would you like me to pay a week in advance?"

"Oh, I wouldn't do that if I was you," said Mrs. Kedge jovially. "Well, I always think it's nuisance enough paying for anything one's had, but paying for anything one hasn't had, well, that's very aggravating, or it would be to me. No, you keep your money, Mrs. Abel. That was the name, I think. You'll excuse me asking you, but is your husband dead?"

"No; he's down in the country working very hard."

"I see. But I'm sorry to hear that. How much did he get?"

Coral looked puzzled.

"Well, don't you think about it, not if it upsets you. I shan't breathe a word about it to nobody. I always say people who's so anxious to talk about other people's troubles ought to have a bit of trouble theirselves. And there's always one thing you must remember. He'll come out all the more loving when he does come out. A friend of mine, a Mrs. Marsh, had a husband who got three years, and just before he was took they led a cat-and-dog's life together; but when he come out she said he was like what he was when they was courting all over again. Yes, they always reckon convicks and sailors make the best husbands."

"My husband isn't in prison, Mrs. Kedge."

"Oh well, never mind, we won't talk about him any more, wherever he is. Now, what about your meals? Of course, you can use my kitchen."

They discussed domestic arrangements for a few minutes, and then Coral suddenly exclaimed:

"Good gracious, what an idiot I am! I'd completely forgotten about the music for my dancing lessons."

"Oh dear, that was something to forget, wasn't it?"

said Mrs. Kedge sympathetically. "Did you leave it in the bus or somewhere?"

"Not printed music," Coral explained. "I mean the music for my pupils to dance to."

"Well, our Tommy plays the mouth-organ very fluent. Any comic song or good hymn he'll pick up in a couple of breaths. But I suppose that wouldn't hardly do for you. It wouldn't hardly be right to go bobbing around to *Hark, the herald*, would it?"

"I'll have to get a gramophone," Coral said.

"Oh dear, now there's a pity! Why, only last week I give ours away to the dustman. You could have had that and welcome, if I'd only have known."

Coral began to think that there would not be much left of her father's money by the time she had decorated the studio and bought a gramophone and paid for a few advertisements. Ought she not to look for some humbler employment?

"I think perhaps, if you don't mind, Mrs. Kedge, that I won't take the studio after all—at any rate not just at present."

All the way back to Islington Coral grew less and less confident of her ability to earn a living as a dancing mistress. But what could she do? She did not know how to type. She did not know shorthand. She should be useless at dressmaking. Should she stand a chance of being employed as a shop assistant? Or to walk on at some theatre? Or as a programme-seller? Or as a telephone operator? Profession after profession chased each other through her mind all the way northward; and by the time she reached Dairymaids Row she was feeling thoroughly alarmed at the future for her and Iris, so much alarmed that if May had pressed her to stay with her she might have lacked the courage to exchange a security, however dull and tiresome, for the insecurity of

Coral

life in Inkerman Villas. But May did not ask her again.

It was about seven o'clock when Coral wheeled Iris along in the perambulator that Frank had brought up with him. Although she was very tired, she half hoped that she should not meet a taxi for quite a long time, because every shilling now was more precious than a family heirloom.

CHAPTER LVIII

CASTLETON

MAY pondered very earnestly that suggestion of Coral's to send money to Frank. In the days when he had lived with her she had not taken his inventing more seriously than she would have taken a passion for fretwork; but when he had told her that he had brought his little girl all the way up from Wiltshire merely to guard himself against being disturbed at his work, May had been considerably impressed. Coral's assertion that he had taken Iris away to punish her might be true; but it could only be half the truth. Frank's reason was the other half. He must be utterly absorbed, or otherwise he would never have allowed Coral to leave him. She probably disturbed his work as much as the child did, May decided, and in that thought was so much appeasement of her own jealousy that she felt more kindly toward Coral than she had ever felt. And then there had been the softening influence of the child.

To be sure, Iris had not behaved herself in a manner calculated to win her aunt's affection. Nor did she bear the least resemblance to her father. Still, she was Frank's child, and the sight of her had taken May back to the days when Frank himself was eighteen months old, the delight of Jenny and herself every day, the joy and the pride of Jenny and herself every day—yes, every single day all those sad years ago. And now that baby boy had a baby girl of his own.

Coral

May longed to be able to do something that would help Frank.

"And really it is important that Frank should have a little money, for he hasn't a halfpenny at the moment." Those were the very words his wife had used, and she ought to know.

"Well, I don't want to give up this house, darling," May said aloud to the picture of Jenny over the mantelpiece. "But you'd rather, wouldn't you, that Frank had the money instead of me living here? I can go and live by myself in a couple of rooms somewhere. I dare say in one way I'd be less lonely in rooms if the woman who let them was easy to get on with. I'd furnish them up, and the rest of the furniture could be stored away. There wouldn't be much, because Frank took away a good deal down to the country. And he won't ever want to live here. Not even if I was dead and gone, and perhaps with you, darling, he wouldn't want to live here. And the money *would* be so useful to him just now. You heard what *she* said. He hasn't a halfpenny. And I did offer her to come and live here. But she advised me to send any money I could spare to Frank. Dancing lessons! I could hardly keep myself from laughing when she started to talk about giving dancing lessons. Don't I just know what you'd have said about her giving dancing lessons if only you'd been alive? Dad said last time I saw him, why didn't I go and live with them, and I said, 'Yes, you'd be sorry if I did.' Oh, Jenny, Jenny, there hasn't been such a great lot to laugh at all this time, but you would have laughed if you'd seen the woman dad's married."

The next morning May paid a visit to Pump Court, where Mr. Huntbath told her, as he always did tell her, that she was quite a stranger.

"Well, I don't get about much, Mr. Huntbath. I

go to the pictures once in a while, but that's about all. Is Mr. Castleton busy?"

"He *has* been very busy. But, of course, things have quietened down now in our walk of life, Miss Raeburn. In fact, he'll soon be going abroad for his vacation. I'll just go in and tell him you're here."

May, sitting opposite the huge barrister, almost looked like a sparrow that had hopped in to the dingy old room from one of the plane trees in the Temple Gardens.

"It's about Frank I've come to see you," she explained.

"Quite a coincidence for you to turn up now," Castleton told her. "About a month ago I saw Maurice for the first time since his daughter ran away and married. I'd heard rumours of that, but I never knew till the other day that it was Frank she'd married. I *was* amazed, especially when I found out that Maurice did not know who Frank was."

"Did you tell him?" May asked, in some alarm.

"No, as a matter of fact," he replied, "I did not, though I very nearly did. However, a legal training is always a check on one's tongue. But I do very strongly advise that he should be told at once. In fact, I was going to write and ask you to come and see me on this very subject, and only put off writing on account of having been so busy. It's not fair either on Frank or the girl to keep them in ignorance."

"Frank knew before he married her," May said.

"He did?" Castleton replied in obvious astonishment. "And does she know?"

May shook her head.

"Then that's very unfair on her."

"Well, she's left him now, any old way," May snapped. Her better will toward Coral was not proof against such criticism of Frank.

Coral

"And gone back to her family?" Castleton asked.

"No, she hasn't gone back home," May had to admit reluctantly. "She's with the little girl in London."

"Maurice didn't tell me there was a child. In fact, I don't believe he knew. Now, May, you and I have been friends long enough for you to stand a lecture, and I am going to say as strongly as I know how that I think it will not merely be stupid, but that it will be actually wrong to leave Maurice and his daughter any longer in ignorance of the truth. Silence at this stage may do irreparable harm. You had no right to prevent his atoning for his selfishness and stupidity in the past, and you have certainly no right to visit on the daughter the follies of the father."

"If Frank doesn't want her to be told I'm not going to step in and interfere. I've the right to think more of what he wants than what anybody else wants," she argued.

"If Frank is obstinate and incapable of understanding the harm his silence may cause, you should take matters into your own hands not merely for her happiness, but equally for his. Don't forget that though Frank is the son of our beloved Jenny, he is also the son of her murderer."

"Fuz!" In the shock his words gave her, May forgot that she always called him "Mr. Castleton" nowadays, and went back to the old nickname of twenty-five years ago.

Castleton leaned over his desk and picked up in his huge fist her frail hand.

"Dear May," he said gently. "I hate to upset you, but we have all of us suffered so much in the past, and it is the duty of you and me to do all we can to prevent another generation's suffering as we did."

"You oughtn't to say things like that, Fuz," she half

sobbed. "You really oughtn't. It's made the room go round and round, what you said about Frank."

"I shall say no more at present," Castleton promised. "But I warn you that if next time I meet Maurice and find him still in ignorance of who his son-in-law is, I shall tell him myself. I simply cannot understand why any secret has been made about it, once you had told Frank. I always appreciated your reasons for keeping the secret from him."

Castleton's plain speaking about the behaviour of Frank and herself in keeping his parentage a secret made it difficult for May to moot the subject for which she had paid this visit to Pump Court. However, she knew of nobody except Castleton who could help her to carry out her plan, and in spite of his strange prejudice against Frank she must take him into her confidence and follow his advice.

"Well, I'll see presently if he won't tell Coral and let her tell her father if she wants to," May said. "But I'm not going to suggest any such a thing just now, because just now he's working all by himself at his invention, and if only he had the money he'd finish it in no time, and I expect if it was finished and successful he'd look at things a bit different."

"I hope he will."

"You're very hard on him, Mr. Castleton."

"No, I'm not at all hard, May. But I can't help being moved by the revenge that time has taken for that unhappy love affair of long ago. Realizing as I do the tremendous attraction that must have brought Frank and Coral together, and the love that has made her throw over everything for him and make what the world would consider a disastrous marriage, and the love that has made him win her in spite of convention, I'm not going to stand by and let two young people destroy what they have

Coral

so bravely and sincerely begun. Come, come, you're making me talk as if I were addressing a jury."

"Well, it's the money I wanted to talk to you about," May said. "I've been thinking to myself I didn't really want the house in Dairymaids Row any more, and really in one way I'd be better in a couple of rooms which I could pay for out of what I get a week, and when all's said and done it really is Frank's own money. And what I'd like you to do, Mr. Castleton," she continued breathlessly, "is to see about selling the house, so as I can send what money comes in to Frank now. It's more useful to him now than what it will be later on when I'm gone, and he has a right to it; and oh, please, don't argue and tell me I'm all wrong, but do help me, so as I can help him."

"Dear May, I shouldn't dream of arguing, for I think your idea is a splendid one. If he throws the money away, he will have had a lesson; and if he uses it wisely, well, I hope that he will have had another lesson."

"But supposing I can't sell the house at once?" May asked. "I mean to say there might be a board up 'To Be Sold,' and it might stay there for a year before anyone came along who wanted it."

Castleton paused a moment to consider.

"Let me see," he said, "we paid £500 for the house when we bought it, and I think we may safely say that it is worth double now. We don't want to sell it at a sacrifice."

"Yes, but Frank must have the money at once," May broke in. "He must have it now, or it won't be any use to him. He hasn't got a halfpenny."

"I appreciate that," Castleton replied. "And I am willing to advance £500 while the house is on the market."

"You will?" May gasped. "Oh, Fuz, what a friend you've always been to Jenny and I."

She wept silently into her handkerchief, while Castleton wrote a letter and a cheque to the manager of the Trowbury Bank and the sparrows cheeped their monotonous praise of the fine June day.

CHAPTER LIX

MAY'S VISIT

MAY decided to go down herself to Wiltshire and inform Frank where Coral was and what Castleton had said about the secret of his birth being kept from her and Maurice, and how she wanted him to use the money she had raised for him.

So next day she telegraphed to him to meet her at Trowbury Station; but when she arrived about half-past two in the afternoon there was no sign of Frank on the platform, and she had considerable difficulty in explaining to the driver of a fly where she wanted to go. The man would not believe at first that there was any inhabited cottage on the top of the downs, and it was only when he had consulted with the ostler of the White Horse inn that he agreed to set out with a fare on such a hazardous voyage of discovery.

Before May had been driven far up the fosse she was inclined to think that there was something to be said in excuse for Coral's behaviour. She should never have imagined that such dreary uninteresting country could exist so far from London. Why, Enfield Chase was a thousand times as pretty as this, and that could quite easily be reached by a tram, and as for Epping Forest, well, that *was* country. This was no better than Hackney Marshes, which you passed in a bus and were jolly glad you didn't live there. What could have possessed Frank to come and live in a place like this?

May's Visit

May poked the driver in the back with her parasol.

"Will we meet any cows on all this grass?" she demanded.

The driver thought it was unlikely.

"'Tis mostly sheep up here, ma'am."

May sighed her relief. Then, looking round and perceiving all the length and steepness of that green road behind her, she was seized with another apprehension, and poked the driver again.

"Your horse isn't likely to turn round and bolt downhill, is he?"

"No, no, ma'am, he's quiet enough."

Yes, she really was able to appreciate Coral's point of view. No wonder she had left Frank. Of course, as his wife she had no business to do anything of the kind. Still, it was easy to understand what she must have felt like, perched up here without a house or a tree for miles. The words of a popular song of May's youth came back to her :

Hi, hi, hi!

Mr. Mackay!

Take me with you when you fly

Back to the Isle of Skye.

"Yes," she murmured to herself. "I reckon that's about what this is. The Isle of Sky. For there's nothing else. Just sky and grass. It is a dog's island. Well, if Frank don't think of some way to fly here, he never will anywhere, that's a sure thing."

"That must be the place you want," the driver said, pointing with his whip to the little grey cottage about a hundred yards farther up the fosse.

"That?" she whispered incredulously. "Oh, it can't be."

"There's nowhere else it can be," the driver affirmed.

Coral

So May alighted presently and tapped on the door. There was no answer.

"It's empty," she said. "It can't be the right place."

"Try the door, ma'am."

"Try the door?" she echoed. "Why, wouldn't it be locked?"

And to her amazement when she did try the door it opened. Inside she recognized pieces of furniture and knew that the driver had not been mistaken. But what carelessness to leave the cottage empty so that anybody could break in and steal whatever took their fancy!

May asked the driver if he could wait for a while. It might be that her nephew had walked in by another road to meet her.

"I'll make you a cup of tea," she volunteered.

But though she searched the cottage all over, May could only find the tea. There was no milk or sugar. There was no bread or butter. There was nothing but a tin of biscuits, and a dirty jam-pot buzzing with flies. She was in the middle of these investigations when Frank appeared in the doorway, gun in hand.

"Oo-er!" she screamed. "Put it down. You are dreadful to go and frighten anyone like that."

"I suppose Coral got you to come and try to talk me round?" Frank asked, without greeting his aunt.

"No; I came because she said you hadn't a halfpenny, and I wanted to tell you that there's £500 paid to your account at the bank in Trowbury."

"I won't take the money," Frank shouted. "I knew that was what she was after when she went to her father's house. But if I starve I'll never take money from him; and as for you, auntie, I'm surprised and disgusted at you for thinking I would."

"This isn't money from Coral. This is your own money. Only, before I start telling you about it, I'd like

May's Visit

to make the driver a cup of tea, and I can't find any milk or sugar."

"There isn't any," said Frank. "Tea and biscuits is all I want, and that's all there is. Send him away, if he wants his tea so bad as all that."

It took May all her time to persuade Frank that the money paid in to his account in Trowbury had nothing whatever to do with Coral.

"If you don't believe me, come back now in the fly, and the bank manager will tell you that it's been paid in through Mr. Castleton. Don't be so obstinate, Frank. It's my own idea for you to have it now, so as you can finish what you're doing and get away from this unnatural place. I never saw such a dog's island in all my life. Oh, Frank, do come back into Trowbury and you'll see I'm speaking the truth."

Frank began to be convinced by her earnestness, and after he had shaved and made himself look tidy, he agreed to drive back with her into Trowbury. Owing to the presence of the driver she did not try to discuss intimate matters, but devoted all her conversation to criticism of the Wiltshire scenery. Of course, when they did reach the bank it was already closed; but Frank promised to come in again to-morrow morning and convince himself that the £500 really was merely an anticipation of what was his own.

"If you'd only met me," May said, "we could have settled it this afternoon, and I wouldn't have been thinking all the time I was going to be chased by cows."

"How could I meet you when I never knew you were coming?" Frank asked.

"I sent you a telegram. I put Amersham Grange Estate on it, the same as I always write."

"Oh, that was a telegram from you, was it?" Frank said.

Coral

"Well, I signed it plain enough."

"Yes, but I hadn't got any money to pay the portage. So it was took back to the post-office," he said. "I spent my last bob bringing the kid up to London."

"And yet you could be so silly about this five hundred pounds!"

"I thought it came from Coral."

May wanted to tell him that even if it had it might have been better for his happiness to accept it; but in his present mood she did not dare, in case he should think that all her talk about selling the house in Dairy-maids Row was a blind to cover the real source of the money. When she left London this morning, she had had every intention of telling him what Castleton had said, but now it seemed inadvisable. Let him enjoy this money first. Let him achieve his ambition, and then he might be in a better mood to take advice.

So she walked along to the station beside Frank without talking to him even about his little girl. For her he was in one of his moods, and ever since he was a little boy she had been accustomed to respect those moods. Just before the train started Frank put his head into the compartment and said:

"Was Coral looking all right when you saw her the day before yesterday?"

"She was looking a bit tired. She's found some rooms, though."

"What part?"

"Hasn't she written, then?" May asked in surprise.

"There wasn't anything for her to write about."

"I should have thought there would have been plenty. Well, if you want to write to her, she's living at 5 In-kerman Villas, which is somewhere round by Maida Vale. On the Regent's Canal she is."

"There isn't anything for me to write to her about,"

May's Visit

said Frank. "Only, I was thinking that if you thought she wanted money you might write and tell me so as I can send her some. I shan't, though, unless you tell me she really wants it badly, because perhaps it's just as well she should find out that money takes a bit of earning. Only, I suppose if she really did want money she'd get it out of her father."

May jumped up from her seat in the corner and leaned out of the window.

"Frank," she began, "now you've got this money of your own, why don't you. . . ." But just then the whistle blew, and the train began to move out of Trowbury.

"Why don't I what?" Frank shouted, walking fast along the platform beside the carriage.

"Well, perhaps I'll write what I was going to say. Good-bye."

Frank walked back to the cottage, thinking how difficult he should find it to borrow sixpence in Trowbury that evening, although he did possess £500 standing to his credit in the bank.

When he got home he made himself a cup of tea and ate all but two of the biscuits. Then he sat down and wrote to his aunt.

White's Cottage,

Trowbury Beacon.

My dear Auntie May,

I never thanked you for what you have done for me by putting five hundred pounds in the bank through Mr. Castleton. Somehow, I'm very bad at thanking anybody for what they do. I do feel truly grateful, I can promise you. This money will be the making of me I am confident. I have all the time been badly stuck up for want of money to buy the proper tools and things not to mention material. I firmly believe that my invention

Coral

is the GOODS. About Coral, I miss her a good deal, but I would sooner die than let her think that I do, and I DON'T want her to come back to me except of her own accord. So please don't you go and tell her this about me missing her. She would think it was her duty to come back, and I do not want that if she prefers to be with the kid. I suppose she likes her independence the same as I like mine. She broke her promise to me by going and seeing her father, but since you were so kind and got me this money, I've begun to wonder if I ever ought to have made her promise what she did. And the first thing I mean to do when I've done what I want with my machine is to tell her she can see her father when she likes as long as she does not expect me to see him. And when I have my success I'll ask her to come back to me of my own accord because she might be shy to come then if she has not come before. Well, good-bye, auntie dear, and many thanks from

*Your loving
Frank.*

CHAPTER LX

EARNING ONE'S LIVING

WHILE Frank was dreaming of the fulfilment of his ambition, and trusting to that for the justification of his marriage, Coral with every day of her exile in Inkerman Villas was coming more and more to regard that marriage as an utter failure. She was deeply wounded that Frank should accept her desertion of him so calmly. He did indeed write that if she was in need of money he could afford to send her some owing to his aunt's kindness; but Coral wrote back that, if he disliked being the object of her father's charity, she disliked equally the prospect of being too greatly indebted to his aunt. She added that, if he did not need her, she did not care to hamper him by taking a pension. It was his willingness to accept this point of view without further argument that persuaded her of his indifference. She was tempted to write to her father, but she refrained because she knew that he would immediately come up to London and endeavour to change her resolution to earn her own living. He might catch her in a weak mood, and her surrender would finally extinguish the little spark of hope that still flickered dimly and fitfully in the dark places of her heart.

So, Coral set about earning her livelihood; and she did not find it at all an easy task. She had abandoned without further consideration the notion of giving dancing lessons. It was obviously impossible to risk more than half of the little money she had on an enterprise with

Coral

such dubious prospects. She paid one visit to a theatrical agent, and was actually offered a place in the chorus of a travelling musical show should some other young woman not arrive by eleven o'clock. But the young woman did arrive, and the agent told Coral to look in again when he should be wanting girls for pantomime.

Mrs. Kedge, on hearing of this narrow escape from going out of town, advised Coral to give up the idea of the stage.

"Well, I mean to say, you couldn't drag little Irish round with you, and though I'd willingly offer to look after her, I think a child of her age does need a mother's care. You take my advice and try for a place in a shop."

Coral tried hard without success. The only thing that shops seemed to require were improvers; and though she expressed herself as perfectly willing to improve, none of the modistes seemed to consider that there was anything to be made of her.

"But why stick to dressmakers?" Mrs. Kedge asked. "Good gracious goodness alive, there's thousands of other shops. I had a fancy once when I was your age to serve in a sweetshop, because I was given to understand they let you eat all the sweets you wanted at first so as to give you a sickener of sweets for the rest of your life. Well, the proprietor was an Italian, a very fierce feller, with a moustache like a fur bore. Us girls was frightened for our lives of him. Well, would you believe it, one day just when I was trying some new caramiles he crept up behind me on tip toe and bellowed all of a sudden in my ear, and I was so scared I bit into the caramile too hard and stuck my teeth together, and the bounder give me the sack before I could get 'em unstuck and explain I thought we was entitled to all we could eat in working hours. Then, you might try for a toyshop. Only, you'd

Earning One's Living

want to be careful when you was winding them up not to get your fingers caught, though if you did you could open your mouth, which is more than I could."

But Coral could not find a place in sweetshop or in toyshop, or in any other kind of shop. Even Mrs. Kedge's optimism was baffled.

"You know what I reckon it is," she said. "I reckon when you go in to see about the place they think you're a customer, and when they find you aren't they're so annoyed they take a pleasure in saying they're already suited. Couldn't you be a little less ladylike? But there, you're like me. I never could fling myself around the same as some of them saucy hussies do nowadays. Mr. Kedge has always reckonized I was a bit different from the rest, and though I'm told by his mates the language he'll use to his camels is somethink beyond anythink, that man has never said what you might call a really bad word in my hearing. He respects me, that's what it is. Well, I always say I might be his garjian angel the way he gets me my cup of tea every morning."

Coral began to worry about her money's lasting. It was now the end of July, and employment seemed as far away as ever. In spite of the most severe economy, she had only four pounds and a few shillings left. When she confided her anxiety to her landlady, she was implored not to worry her pretty head.

"Good gracious heart alive, I'm sure you could stay on as long as you like, and neither me nor Mr. Kedge would ever ask you for a halfpenny. It's company for me when you are in, and as for little Irish, well, as I often say, I couldn't be fonder of the child not if she was my own. Could I, my pretty jool?"

This to Iris, who smiled back engagingly.

"She don't talk much for her age, do she?" said

Coral

Mrs. Kedge. "What is she now? Nineteen months you said? Yes, you'd expect her to talk more than what she does."

"I believe I talked very late," Coral said.

"Ah, there you are, that's what they call—oh, dear now, I'm bothered if I haven't forgotten what they do call it. But it begins with a aitch."

"Heredity," Coral suggested.

"That's it. Well, really, the words one's expected to remember nowadays. Who invents them? That's what I sometimes ask myself."

It was well into August when Coral came back to Inkerman Villas with the news that she had got a job as a canvasser for some patent corsets. Mrs. Kedge was so pleased that she insisted on being Coral's first customer.

"Not that I'll be able to wear them myself, but with all those holes punched in 'em they ought to be nice and airy, and I'll send my married daughter a pair. They'll be just right for the West Injies."

It cost Coral much time and shoe-leather and many smiles to make her profession pay, but she managed to earn twenty-two shillings the first week and twenty-six shillings the second.

"And that's very good for August. You'll do better in September," her landlady prophesied.

Mrs. Kedge was right. She actually earned thirty-four shillings during the second week of September, and she was so pleased with herself that she wrote and invited Aunt May to come to tea that she might boast of her prowess. With Mrs. Kedge's help she tried to make a cake, but Mrs. Kedge was so excited by the prospect of a visitor and Coral was so clumsy that the cake was a failure and collapsed.

"A pair of your patent corsets wouldn't have done

Earning One's Living

the cake no harm," said Mrs. Kedge. "Well, we'll have to send Tommy round the corner to fetch a Madeira. That's nice and light, and you may be sure little Irish will want to eat plenty, won't you, my poppet. She don't look too well, do she?" Mrs. Kedge went on, cocking her head on one side to judge Iris's appearance. "I dare say the hot weather pulled her down a bit, poor lamb!"

"I don't think she looks very bad," said Coral, a little anxiously.

"Oh no, not bad. Only a bit peakified," Mrs. Kedge suggested.

But when Aunt May saw Iris she told Coral that she did not look half the child she was when she came up from Wiltshire in June.

"However," said Aunt May, "from what I hear she'll soon be going back."

"What do you mean?" Coral exclaimed in alarm. Surely Frank could not be proposing to take Iris away from her?

"Well, he's written me to say that he's pretty near finished, and may make his first really successful flight almost any day now."

"He hasn't told me anything," Coral said.

"Hasn't he? If I'd only have thought, I'd have brought his letter along to show you."

"Thanks; I'm not very much interested in it," Coral replied coldly. "Luckily I'm earning my own living," she added. "You might mention that to him when you answer his letter."

She could not help feeling resentful that Frank should confide in his aunt to the exclusion of herself. She did not expect him to keep his progress a secret from Aunt May, especially after the money she had given him. But he might have written to his wife . . . perhaps he thought

Coral

that his wife no longer believed in the ultimate perfection of his machine. . . .

"I've got to be looking for lodgings soon," said May, breaking in on her niece's reverie.

"You?" Coral exclaimed.

"Yes, I'm likely to sell the house in Dairymaids Row this week."

Coral began to understand now how Aunt May had managed to find the money for Frank.

"Why don't you look for rooms somewhere round here?" she suggested, for she wanted to show Aunt May how much she admired her unselfishness.

May's pale face flushed with pleasure.

"Well, I hadn't thought of that. Well, perhaps I will. It would be nice to see a bit of Iris. Hasn't she been good this afternoon? She hasn't cried not once."

"You must remember, Aunt May, that when Frank brought her up to you it was the first time she had ever been separated from me, and that her teeth had been giving her a lot of trouble."

After tea, when Aunt May got up to go, Coral suggested that she should walk with her as far as the bus.

"I'd like to give Iris some fresh air. I'm out so much myself now during the day that she doesn't get out as much as she ought, I'm afraid. Mrs. Kedge's little girl used to take her out during the holidays, but she's gone back to school now."

"Well, if I do find rooms near by," May promised, "I'll make it my job to see she has all the fresh air she wants."

While they stood at the corner waiting for the bus, May turned to Coral shyly.

"I'm afraid I was very nasty with you at first. One day you'll know why, and then perhaps you'll forgive me."

Earning One's Living

"Dear Aunt May, I've nothing to forgive. I'm sure I must have exasperated you at first by the muddle I made of your house. I wouldn't be quite so bad now."

"You'll never have the chance in that house," May said, dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief. "Between you and I, Coral, I do feel it a bit, parting with that little house. Only, I wouldn't have Frank know I did. Not for anything. I know I did right to give him the money now. And you see. It'll all come right presently. Why, I'll be coming to stay with you soon instead of you coming to me."

"I wish I had your faith, Aunt May," Coral sighed.

"Well, you can have, because I know I'm right. Here comes my bus. Good-bye, duckie!"

Coral bent down and kissed the little pale face.

"Baby darling," she said to Iris when May was gone, "you didn't wave your hand very nicely to poor Auntie May. It wasn't kind, was it?"

But Iris seemed as listless in responding to her mother as she had been in waving good-bye to her aunt. Coral leaned over the handle of the perambulator and stroked away the curls from her forehead.

"Dearest, you're rather hot, aren't you? Don't you feel very well, my precious?"

CHAPTER LXI

CROUP

WHEN Coral got back to Inkerman Villas, she called Mrs. Kedge up to consult her about Iris.

The landlady was as usual indomitably optimistic.

"Oh no, I don't think there's anything the matter with her. She's a bit tired, that's all. There was a fresh face at tea, and that may have tired her a bit extra. It couldn't have been the cake, because those madeiras are too light to hurt anybody. I should give her a powder before she goes to her bye-bye. I'll have a lovely spoonful of raspberry jam all ready to pop into her mouth with it."

In spite of Mrs. Kedge's remedy Iris was restless all night and seemed to be in slight pain, though her mother could not extract from her where it was hurting her. In the morning she was languid and silent, whereas usually this was her most talkative time. On those summer mornings when Coral used to lie wondering what she ought to do if she did not succeed in finding work in the course of the day before her, Iris would chatter away to herself about the wonders she was finding in the bed, such as the blue and orange lines in the blanket, or she would dig out with laborious grunts some fragment of thorn which had survived the carding of the wool. She would long to put this fragment in her mouth, and Coral would watch her struggle against the temptation by saying "No, no, no," and shaking her head vigorously

until at last the desire was overcome and the fragment would be flung away the very short distance of which those fat fingers were capable. Sometimes in the course of her investigations she would touch a feather that had escaped from the pillow. This would make her shudder violently, and drive her to take refuge at the other end of the bed; but sometimes if the feather was extra large and grey she would begin to whimper with fear and disgust. This horror of feathers had been caused by Frank's teasing her with the wings of the birds he shot. There were some mornings when she did not chatter, but when she would sit in a rapture, gazing up at the shifting golden shadows on the ceiling, or listening to the quick cheeps of the sparrows in the poplar tree that grew beside the fence above the banks of the canal.

But her silence on this September morning was no rapture of the senses. She lay back pale and listless, staring with blue lacklustre eyes at nothing.

"I've a very good mind to call a doctor," Coral told Mrs. Kedge.

"Well, of course, you please yourself, Mrs. Abel. But if I was you I wouldn't trouble the doctor just yet. You call in a doctor, and he's got to find something the matter, or else he wouldn't be a doctor. That's what I always say. She might stay in bed perhaps just for the morning, but you see if by dinner-time she isn't quite herself again, laughing away like the little love she is. Ain't you, my beauty?"

But Iris paid no attention to the beaming smile of her friend Mrs. Kedge. She lay there staring listlessly at nothing.

"If she's not better by mid-day," Coral declared, "I shall fetch a doctor. I shan't do any canvassing this morning."

"Why not take her temperachoor? That's what I

Coral

always advise." Mrs. Kedge spoke as if a thermometer were itself a remedy.

"She is a bit feverish. Nearly 100°. Who is your doctor, Mrs. Kedge?"

"Well, I haven't had a doctor not since we come to Inkerman Villas. We used to have a Doctor Seton in Camden Town. But that's a bit far to send and fetch him. There is a doctor round the corner in Sebastopol Road—Fry's the name I think. But you'll see the plate, which is always kept very bright. Let's hope the doctor is as bright as what his plate is."

Doctor Fry had already gone out on his morning round when Coral went to him; but she left word asking him to call, and about a quarter-to-three he arrived. He was a young, sandy-haired man with a soft and pleasant voice.

"There's nothing much the matter with her at present," he decided, after an examination which was strongly resented by Iris, in spite of her lassitude. "I'll look in again to-morrow. Meanwhile, I'll give you a prescription. No, there's not much the matter at present," he repeated. "But . . ." he broke off.

"You think there may be?" Coral asked, her heart beginning to thump.

"I shouldn't care to say as much as that," the doctor replied. "But there's just a chance that she may be sickening for something. Her tonsils are a little red. But she doesn't seem to find much discomfort in her throat. Yes, I'll look in again to-morrow morning."

Iris remained all day in the same state of lassitude, but when she was put to bed seemed no worse. About eleven o'clock just when her mother was going to close the book she was reading and undress she woke suddenly, breathing with loud and hurried gasps, as if she had been frightened in her sleep.

"My precious, what's the matter?" Coral cried.

Iris began to cry and clutched at her throat, coughing from time to time with a harsh metallic noise. She tossed her body about and seized with both hands her mother's sleeve, then once more clutched at her throat. Her bright, anxious eyes were unbearably pathetic. Coral wanted to leave her for a moment to go and call Mrs. Kedge; but at the least movement away from the bed Iris called to her in a shrill, cracked voice that presently turned to a mere whistle. Her flushed face deepened to a dusky hue, and then changed to a deadly pallor. Her restlessness increased. She appeared to be on the verge of convulsions. Her head was flung far back, her chin outthrust. The effort to breathe was terrific. Coral tore herself away from the bed for a moment and called for Mrs. Kedge, who had luckily not gone to bed, and came up at once.

"What is the matter with her?" Coral cried. "She isn't dying, is she? Do send quickly for the doctor."

"What's the matter with her?" Mrs. Kedge repeated very calmly. "Why, croup's the matter. Our Tommy used to have it two or three times a year for a long time. No need at all to fetch the doctor. The first thing we've got to do is put her in a warm mustard bath. You stay here, and I'll get it up."

Coral could not believe when she saw the agonies Iris was going through that the attack was not dangerous. When Mrs. Kedge came back, she begged her to send one of the children for Doctor Fry.

"Now don't you fret yourself," Mrs. Kedge replied. "I tell you I know *all* about croup. It looks horrible, but she'll come round in an hour or two. There's no need whatever for you to frighten yourself. What she ought to have is a tea-spoon of ippikekuanna wine, and Mr. Kedge has gone round to the chemist's for a bottle.

Coral

And I told him to fetch a mustard plaster at the same time. I know jest where to clap it on. Only, it'll make her wriggle a bit. Now keep calm and, while I sponge her with hot water, you run down and get the kettle boiling. Oh, what I don't know about croup, the times I had with our Tommy!"

Coral was reassured by Mrs. Kedge's confidence, especially when she came back and found that she had made a tent of blankets over the bed.

"Now give me the kettle and you light the fire in here, so as we can keep one on the boil all the time."

"What's the ipecacuanha for?"

"Why, to make the poor mite sick. That loosens the crouping."

For two hours they endeavoured to relieve Iris; but at the end of that time in spite of the tent and boiling water and emetics and mustard plaster, she was no better. Her pulse was terribly rapid. Her body was covered with a cold and clammy sweat. Her face was leaden pale.

"Tommy's attacks never lasted like this," said Mrs. Kedge. "After two hours he was always asleep. I think perhaps we had better send for the doctor."

Mrs. Kedge's abrupt loss of confidence unnerved Coral, and while they waited for the doctor she gave up all hope for the little life that was struggling so desperately to remain with her, but that could not resist much longer the strain of the fight for breath.

When the doctor came, he diagnosed croup and endorsed Mrs. Kedge's treatment; but presently after a terrible fit of coughing he looked grave.

"I'm afraid that it may be diphtheritic," he said.

"Diphtheria!" cried Coral. "But, couldn't you have told that when you saw her this afternoon? You looked at her throat."

"Yes, but this is a case of the diphtheria's attacking

the larynx first. It's going to mean tracheotomy, but there's nothing to alarm yourself over. With antitoxin there is comparatively little danger even after tracheotomy. And anyway you'll do more to save your child's life by helping the doctor than by reproaching him."

Coral made a supreme effort to push her own anxiety far into the background so that she should be able to help the doctor as if she had no more to lose than a nurse who loses a patient.

CHAPTER LXII

DIPHTHERIA

FOR two days and two nights Iris's condition hardly changed; but then at last the antitoxin seemed to arrest the spread of the foul membrane.

"Oh, she'll be all right now," Mrs. Kedge declared. "I wonder where she caught the blessed diptheria. Cuddling that cat what's always coming in from next door I'll be bound. It *was* coughing, and the doctor says it might easily have been that. Well, the next time anybody has diptheria I shall know all about it, though I shouldn't like to open anybody's neck for them the way he did. In fact, I wouldn't attempt it."

Now that the danger really did seem to have gone by, Coral asked herself what she should have done if Iris had died. She realized that to be asking herself such a question was a sign that she was so much overwrought by anxiety as hardly to be responsible. Yet in spite of realizing this her brain went on mechanically asking the insane question.

"You want a good sleep," Mrs. Kedge told her.

"I couldn't sleep."

"Don't talk so silly. You've got to sleep. You'll be of more use to little Irish when you've had a good sleep. You're no use at all now—sitting there and staring at the wall as if you had the D.T.'s."

Coral knew that Mrs. Kedge was right, and though she could scarcely bear to leave Iris she agreed to try to sleep. In the morning she woke with her mind clear again.

Diphtheria

She decided that the first thing to do was to write and tell Frank what had happened and ask him to come to her.

My dearest, she began, and then paused in perplexity. Was Frank her dearest? Could she really begin a letter like that when that dearest was lying there so good and so still, that suffering dearest? She crossed out *My dearest* and substituted *My darling*.

My darling, she wrote, *I want you as soon as you get this letter to come to me in London. We have nearly lost Baby. She has diphtheria, but the worst is over. Only, Frank dear, she is both of us. If I have lost one half of you I still have in her the other half. Won't you give me back all yourself? I think we have both been in the wrong, but I'm sure that I have. So forgive me for breaking my promise. If you knew what I have suffered these last three days. Three days! They seem like three centuries. Frank, in nearly losing Baby I realized what it would mean to lose you. Come back to*

Your

Coral.

I want to get Baby down into the country again as soon as she is well enough, and I want to hear all about the wonderful things you've been doing. But come quickly. I feel terribly lost now without you. Will you send me some money, please, as I want to get the things Baby wants all the time.

When two days later Coral had not received any answer to this letter and Frank himself had not come, she telegraphed to Aunt May, to whom she had not written because she had not wanted to see anybody until she had been taken to Frank's arms again.

Coral

May arrived a couple of hours after the telegram was sent, and was inclined to be hurt with Coral for not having sent for her; but when she saw the little girl she burst into tears and begged to be forgiven for having said once that Iris cried a lot.

"But why haven't you telegraphed to Frank?" she asked. "Whatever he did wrong, it isn't fair not to tell him anything."

Coral explained to her aunt about the unanswered letter.

"I can't understand it," May declared. "He can't have had it. He wouldn't do a thing like that, or if he has," she added fiercely, "well, then, he's not my sister Jenny's boy, and I'll never have no more to do with him, because he'd be a rotter."

"Perhaps he's only waited to finish his work," Coral suggested. "You see, I told him that the worst was over."

"It doesn't matter what you told him, once you'd told him she'd got diptheria," May replied. "He ought to have thrown up anything he was working on and come by the first train."

"Perhaps he's ill himself," Coral said.

"Oh, of course, if he's really ill he couldn't be blamed for not coming. But if he doesn't come to-day, and you don't get a letter to-morrow morning, just let me know, and I'll go down to Trowbury myself and see just what he is doing. I'd never have believed he could behave like this, and I shan't be long in telling him so, what's more. To think of me signing away my poor little house this week, and him to go and behave like that!"

"I'm sure there'll be some explanation, Aunt May," Coral said. "Because for one thing I asked him to send me some money to get all the things that Iris wants,

and he'd surely have done that unless there is some reason we don't know of."

"Do you want any money?" May asked eagerly.

"Well, I do want some rather badly. Of course, I could write to my father, but I wanted to ask Frank because I thought it would please him."

"Won't you ask me?" May begged. "It would please me. I have quite a lot, because the house will be paid for in a moment, and I got £900 for it. Of course, Frank's had some of that, but there'll be several hundreds left. And you don't know how pleased I'd be to be able to help over Iris."

"I'll accept some money from you willingly, dear little Aunt May."

"Oh, Coral, I don't know however I could have been so nasty to you at first. And if Frank hadn't have brought Iris up to me, I'd have gone on being nasty, I dare say. So perhaps it was all for the best he did."

"Yes, but, Aunt May, when I thought she was going to die I didn't find it was all for the best."

"Well, you leave it to me," said May. "I'll come round again this evening and bring you some money, and perhaps I'll stay the night to see if there's a letter or a telegram from him in the morning, and if there isn't I'm going down to Trowbury myself to see whatever can be the matter with him."

CHAPTER LXIII

THE PAST

FRANK did not come that day, and in the morning there was no letter from him. So May set out for Wiltshire, slightly comforted by the knowledge that Iris seemed definitely very much better. She was glad in a way to be making this journey, because it helped to assuage the pang of leaving the little house in Dairymaids Row. Quite independently of the solemn words Castleton had addressed to her on the evil and folly of the secret she and Frank had maintained against Coral and her father, May herself had in her own heart recognized that evil and folly. Indeed so completely had her point of view changed that she could now scarcely imagine the state of her mind before the illness of Iris made all jealousy, all revenge, all pride, all bitterness appear in their barren reality. The little fat fingers of Iris had torn off the dark masks and laid bare the mouldering skulls behind.

May found the fly that had driven her up to the cottage on the downs the first time she came to see Frank. The sun was not shining as it shone in June. It was one of those breathless afternoons before rain, an afternoon of still grey clouds, and amaranthine horizons, and clarity of mournful air.

This time May was not able to open the door of the cottage when after knocking for a while there was no answer from within.

"Gentleman not at home?" asked the driver.

"He doesn't seem to be. But perhaps you wouldn't

mind waiting a bit like you did before? I suppose that's right what you said about there not being any cows up here?"

The driver assured her that there was no danger of meeting any cows, and May, who did not want to talk to him, decided to go for a stroll on the beacon.

"There's one thing," she said to herself. "Anyone can see anything a long way off, so it's not likely I'll miss Frank when he does come back."

Presently she sat down on a grassy cumulus and contemplated the widespread view of the vale below.

"It's not quite so dull as I thought it was at first," she told herself. "But when all's said and done, it's not a bit better than good old Hampstead Heath."

A figure appeared walking over the downs quite a mile away.

"That must be Frank," she decided. "What a speck anybody looks up here! If Frank looks like that to me, what a wurzit I must look to him! If I was to stand up and wave, he'd never guess it was me. He'd think it was a bird flapping its wings."

The distant form drew nearer, and May began to wonder if it really was Frank.

"I don't believe it is him at all, and yet there's something about it that does remind me of somebody."

May was seized with the fancy that this moment was the repetition of another moment of profound significance to her life. This figure approaching her was certainly not Frank . . . it was . . .

"Oo-er, it's Maurice!" she cried aloud; and the sound of her own voice breaking the trance of this heavy-lidded afternoon seemed to be the voice of Jenny when she saw him coming back into her life across those wide sands in Cornwall long ago. So sharp was this impression that May looked round with half an expectation of

Coral

finding her dead sister seated beside her on this green mound.

"Good job I'm sitting out here in the open air," she thought. "If I'd seen him coming to the cottage and me inside I'd have gone barmy. One thing, he'll be more surprised at meeting me than what I shall be at meeting him. And another thing, I'll certainly have to tell him now who Frank is, whether Frank likes it or not."

She rose from the cumulus and advanced to meet Maurice, whom she had last seen in the witness-box at the trial of Zachary Trewhella. He did not recognize her until she was within a few yards of him. Then he turned very white and passed a hand across his eyes as if he would banish a phantom from his mind.

"I'm quite real," said May. "It is me."

"May!"

"I don't suppose you expected to see me again here."

"I certainly did not. I have been walking about up here a great deal during the last week and dreaming so much of the past that I took you for a vision. You've hardly changed in all these years, you know; far, far less than I have."

"I don't think that you've changed so much."

"A good deal, May, in many ways," he replied. "But why should I meet you here on these deserted uplands? That must have been your fly I saw by the cottage. I hoped it meant that somebody had come back whom I have been expecting."

"You mean Coral?"

"But this is fantastic! How do you know I am expecting her? You've met her? Where is she? Tell me that, May. I have lost her again."

"She's in London. Not far from Paddington. Five Inkerman Villas is the address. I saw her yesterday."

The Past

Her little girl is ill with diptheria. She has been terribly bad, but she's better now."

"I suppose you met Coral through knowing her husband?"

"That's right. It was through him."

"Then, that's why the cottage is empty. But I could have sworn that last week I saw him on these downs."

"But he's still here, isn't he?" May asked, in some alarm.

"The cottage has been empty for a week. I've been feeling very uneasy about Coral. I live close by here, you know, and she came to see me nearly two months ago. She asked me not . . . but perhaps you know all this?"

"Yes, I know all about it," said May. "But there's one thing *you* don't know."

"Ah, May, there are a thousand things that I don't know."

"Yes, but one thing in particular. You don't know who her husband is."

"Frank Abel?"

"Frank Abel Trehwella."

"Trehwella? Not . . ."

"Yes, Maurice, he's Jenny's boy."

"But why wasn't I told? Why didn't *you* tell me? Why didn't *he* tell me? Why didn't Coral herself tell me?"

"Coral didn't know. If it comes to that, she doesn't know not even now."

Whereupon May gave Maurice the history of the marriage as she had beheld it.

"And you mustn't blame Frank too much," she said.

"I blame nobody except myself for anything," Maurice broke in. "Whatever unhappiness there has been from the beginning is due to me, and to me alone."

Coral

"Yes, but Frank and I was both in the wrong," May insisted. "Only, I was more in the wrong than him, because if I hadn't told him the way I did he wouldn't have been so bitter about it. But if it was you, Maurice, that taught me how to hate, it was your daughter who taught me how to forgive. And, mind you, she wasn't soppy with it all. She came to the point when she wasn't going to stand no more, and I don't blame her, I don't. And I wouldn't have interfered now if she hadn't have written to Frank and got no reply."

"Where *can* he be?"

"He must be here."

"He's not, May. All this last week my mind has been tormented by premonitions. In my uneasiness I've come up here two or three times a day, and there has been no sign of life. I made inquiries in Trowbury, but nobody seemed to know anything there."

"Well, we must find him, Maurice. We must. I wouldn't dare go back to Coral without him. She's set her heart on him coming back to her."

Maurice thought for a moment before he spoke again.

"The first thing to do," he said at last, "is to get rid of your fly, because I propose to break into the cottage. You can walk down with me to Merryfield, and if necessary stay the night there. We'll wire to Coral. You needn't be shy about meeting people. My wife and my son are abroad. If you and I have to go up to London, we can go together."

CHAPTER LXIV

THE EMPTY COTTAGE

WHEN the fly had been paid off and the sound of the wheels had died away down the fosse, Maurice and May approached the cottage, which in the deep hush of this dove-grey afternoon seemed to stand upon the hillside like a tomb. And to fling his weight against it, as Maurice did, with repeated thuds seemed somehow like the violation of a tomb.

The door gave way at last, and mercifully the sight which both of them expected did not appear, although the heart of neither ceased to gallop until Maurice had been upstairs and brought back the news that the two rooms above were as empty as those below.

May dabbed her forehead with his handkerchief.

"I thought we was going to find him dead."

Maurice patted her shoulder consolingly.

"Well, it's not so bad as that, thank heaven. Why, hullo, here's a letter in Coral's writing! You see he hasn't been here for at least three days. The postman must have pushed it under the door."

"I'm glad he never received it," May sighed. "But, oh, Maurice, where can he be?"

"I expect he's gone away in search of some material he wants for his apparatus," Maurice surmised. "I've no doubt whatever that there's a perfectly simple explanation. You and I were both a little overwrought by meeting each other like this. There is really no reason

Coral

whatever to suppose that anything serious has happened. Living up here by himself he could easily be away for a month and nobody be any the wiser. I'm not a bit worried about Frank. But I confess that I am worried about Coral. She is more overwrought than either you or I, and I should like to be able to reassure her. What shall we do with this letter meanwhile?"

"Hadn't we better leave it here in case he comes back all of a sudden?" May suggested.

"Yes, but hadn't you better leave a note for him, explaining that you tried to find him?"

"I don't think letters is much good, I don't," said May. "If he don't come for *her* letter, he won't come for mine."

"Perhaps you're right. Letters do make more mischief than anything," Maurice agreed, with a sigh.

"Well, nothing more can be done up here this afternoon," he added. "You'd better come back with me to Merryfield and have some tea anyway, even if you decide not to spend the night."

"Oh, I couldn't spend the night. I haven't got anything with me. And besides, I ought to get back to Coral."

"I think I'll come up to town with you," Maurice said. "We can have dinner and catch the 8.45. Even if we can't bring Frank back with us, we shall be able to make her feel more at peace about the future. At least, I hope we shall," he added, half to himself, in sad accents.

Indeed, Maurice was feeling a great deal more anxious than he admitted to May. It was seeming to him that the dark web of destiny was not even yet completely woven.

"You don't think," he said to May, as they walked along over the downs toward Merryfield, "you don't

The Empty Cottage

think that Frank may be going to complete his revenge upon me by deserting Coral as I deserted Jenny? ”

But May was sure that that had never been a part of his plan.

“He loves her too much for that,” she declared.

“I loved his mother. But that didn’t prevent my leaving her as I did.”

“No, he wouldn’t do that, Maurice, I’m positive. All he wanted was to keep Coral from having anything to do with you. He was bitter against you, and that was mostly my fault, because of the way I told him the story of you and Jenny. What upset him was the idea you wouldn’t marry Jenny because she wasn’t good enough for you and your family. He was absolutely determined you shouldn’t go and try and make a gentleman of him. But in a way you can’t blame him for not wanting to take money from you. He’s always been very independent, like his mother was.”

They fell into reminiscences of Jenny as they trudged through the deepening stillness of that ashen and sombre afternoon.

“Even now,” May said, “I can’t sometimes believe that she really is dead. Just now, when I was sitting on that big hump of grass and saw you coming, I had a feeling she was sitting there beside me, and I nearly turned and said to her, ‘Oo-er, Jenny, it is Maurice!’ ”

“I wish that her ghost had been beside you, May, and that she could have seen that you and I were friends again, and that she could know that at last she and I are one in our grandchild. Oh, May, fancy Jenny a grandmother!”

They both laughed; but upon that ashen and sombre afternoon their laughter sounded as ghostly as might the mirth of her they talked of.

“When I look back now to my first meeting with

Coral

Frank I remember how extraordinarily I was attracted to him, and I could not think of whom he was continually reminding me. In fact, I asked him once if he'd ever seen me before."

"He didn't know who you was then," May said. "I didn't tell him till he said he wanted to marry Coral. Fuz gave me an awful lecture about not telling you when I last went to see him."

They talked for awhile of Castleton and then again of the past, of parties and balls and merry drives and of Jenny's friends in the ballet.

They reached Merryfield at last, and May, who was not used to such long walks, was glad enough to sit down in one of Maurice's big arm-chairs.

"Coral has never seen this room," he said. "I was planning the decoration of it the day she told me that she was going to marry Frank."

"Fancy her leaving all this to marry Frank," May exclaimed, looking round at the scarlet shelves crammed with books, at the red lacquer cabinets and the velvet curtains of black and vermillion.

"It wasn't much to forsake for such a love as hers must have been," Maurice sighed.

"You wouldn't leave it for Jenny?"

"No, but, thank heaven, the better part of me is in Coral. Look, May, here are some photographs of Jenny. And look, do you see that columbine asleep? That was painted by a friend of ours when he saw her tired after a fancy dress ball at Covent Garden. That was in the hey-day of the waltz. What waltzes we had together! Why, I can remember just how the corners of different ball-rooms looked when we were dancing round together, and I can still hear the shuffle of all those feet; like dead leaves. Well, I don't deserve it, but when I think that in Iris I shall see sometimes a flash of Jenny, and perhaps

The Empty Cottage

sometimes a look of myself, why, May, there'll never in the world have been such a fond and doting grandfather as I shall be."

At this moment a maid came in with a telegram, by which Maurice was obviously much upset.

"Ask the man to wait a moment."

When she had closed the door, he turned to May.

"I knew we had still to dree our weird. It's from Coral."

He read aloud the fatal words :

I had a terrible dream about Frank this afternoon and when I woke I found Baby very much worse please telegraph if he is all right and coming to London his aunt went to fetch him this morning but I have no news and am afraid she has missed him please find out if he has left the cottage the doctor will not give me any hope for Baby and Frank must come at once if he can but if he is not in the cottage please search in the chalk-pit beyond the trowbury giant and come yourself as soon as possible
Coral

"What can she mean about the chalk-pit?" May asked, staring tremulously at the coloured paper in his hand.

"I guess what she means. She's evidently had some dream of an accident or something. May, I'll send you into the station with the car. I shall go back to the downs before it gets too dark. You must go back at once to Coral and say I shall search everywhere. Entreat her not to let this dream worry her. Oh, God, if she should lose her little girl!"

Within ten minutes May was driving through a steady drench of rain to the railway station; and Maurice was once more climbing the downs.

CHAPTER LXV

LOVE AND DEATH

AT two o'clock that afternoon Coral, who had been awake most of the previous night, went to lie down for an hour before the doctor's visit, while Mrs. Kedge sat with Iris. She fell asleep and dreamed that she had seen Frank hovering with huge black wings above the chalk-pit on Trowbury Beacon. She had watched him with an increasing agony of apprehension when suddenly the wings had crumpled up and he had fallen with a dreadful crash that was still echoing in her ears as Mrs. Kedge knocked on the door to wake her, and came in to say that the doctor would like to speak to her.

"I wouldn't have woke you up," Mrs. Kedge said, "if he hadn't have said he wanted to speak to you so particular. He seems a bit worried. But don't you worry. You've always got to remember that it pays a doctor to look worried sometimes, because if he didn't he wouldn't get the credit for having done nothing. That's the way of the world in everything. So don't be *too* worried by what he says."

With the horror of the dream at the back of her mind, and with instant fear tearing at her heart, Coral jumped up and hurried in to hear what the doctor had to say to her. The gravity of his face confirmed Mrs. Kedge's warning.

Yet there was nothing in the outward appearance of her baby that would have given Coral any special anxiety apart from the doctor's expression. She seemed indeed to be lying there drowsy and comfortable.

Love and Death

"I have just been listening to her heart," Dr. Fry began.

"And you are afraid of some complications?" Coral said, her tongue parched by terror.

"Mrs. Abel, it would not be fair to deceive you." He looked away for a moment from the mother. "I fear the worst."

"You mean she's going to die?" Coral heard herself whisper amid the icy waves that were surging over her.

"Unless"—the doctor's voice wavered—"unless a miracle happens, yes."

Coral pressed her hand against her eyes.

"And there is nothing to be done? Nothing in all England?"

"I fear, nothing."

"And she may die at any minute?"

"She may live for two or three days. It is improbable that the end will be very sudden. A gradual failure of circulation is what we must expect."

"And nothing can be done?"

"Without a miracle, nothing."

"And I thought that she was better," Coral moaned.

"That is the distressing part of cardiac failure," the doctor said. "More often than not its symptoms do not show themselves until the patient seems to have definitely turned the corner. I should warn you that she will almost certainly have severe attacks of vomiting, but generally she will be very drowsy as at this moment."

"And nothing can be done?"

He shook his head once more.

"I must just sit beside her and watch her slowly die?"

"Mrs. Abel, I wish I could give you any hope, but it would not be fair to cheat you with false hopes."

"No, I'm grateful to you, doctor, for not doing that."

Coral

Very grateful. I might have left her again as I left her this afternoon, to sleep, and so have lost some of the minutes I still have her. Your frankness has been very kind. . . . I appreciate it very much. Would you do me another kindness, doctor? Would you send a telegram I am going to write, and would you tell Mrs. Kedge that I would rather be alone for the next few hours? If I need her, I will call her. But I want to be alone with my baby."

Doctor Fry waited while Coral wrote the telegram to her father. Then he left her alone with Iris.

Coral stood beside the bed and looked down at her little girl, marked the growing pallor of those cheeks, and listened to the slow sighing of that beloved breath. Outside it was raining steadily, and each raindrop that shivered the surface of the dark canal seemed like a lost second of the time that remained to Iris. The gliding of a barge across that small space of window-pane seemed to mark the intolerable fugacity of that little life on the bed.

"I suppose I ought to pray," Coral thought. "But if I pray and my prayer is not granted, I shall have wasted on God some more of the time that is left to her and me."

She leant over Iris.

"My treasure, are you feeling comfy?"

Iris summoned a faint smile for her mother's pleasure.

"Poor," she murmured.

"Poor throat?" Coral asked tenderly.

"Poor Ilis," she replied, and the pale lids drooped wearily over those great lack-lustre eyes.

"My darling, my darling, mother knows how poor you feel all over. Mother understands so well how her baby girl is feeling."

Coral let fall a tear upon the limp hand, which made Iris open her eyes again.

Love and Death

"Oh, hot," she whispered; and then she tried to lift her arm to stroke her mother and console her. But the effort was beyond her weakness, and she relapsed into a lethargy, sighing more deeply with every slow breath.

Thus the afternoon passed. Just before sunset the clouds broke, and the room glowed with a rich golden light. Outside the sparrows cheeped in a great chorus.

"Oh, hark!" Iris murmured.

"Do you like to hear the birdies, my beautiful?"

But already the lids had drooped again, and the sparrows cheeped on disregarded.

Once Coral asked herself if the presence of Frank would have helped her; but the intrusion even of that thought seemed like a desecration of her agony, a theft of moments that belonged to Iris alone. The sun was once more clouded over; and, as the leaden dusk crept on, Coral asked herself in a sudden access of wild despair if this was the last time that Iris would ever behold the sun.

When it was nearly dark, Mrs. Kedge came to the door and tapped very gently; but Coral could not bring herself to answer, and after a while she heard the footsteps shuffle off along the landing. She could hardly bear to pull down the blind, because the morning might never break for Iris.

Thus the evening deepened; and night fell, heavy and black.

Doctor Fry paid another visit about half-past nine.

"She's not perceptibly weaker," he said.

As the sun had broken forth after the rain in a stream of gold, hope blazed up in Coral's heart.

"She might recover?"

"Mrs. Abel, I wish I could say 'yes.' But . . ." He shook his head and turned away.

May arrived just as the doctor was leaving.

Coral

"I came as soon as ever I could get here," she told Coral. "We stopped at every station till I could have screamed. How is the poor kid?"

"She's dying."

"Oh, Coral, she can't be. She mustn't die. Can't we send for another doctor?"

"There's nothing to be done," said Coral in a dull voice. "Why hasn't Frank come? Or have you come to tell me that *he* is dead?"

"We didn't find him in the cottage. He hadn't had your letter. He must have gone away, Maurice thinks."

"Maurice? Do you mean my father?"

"Yes, we met again. I knew him years ago. Don't ask me to explain now why I never told you before. He loved my sister Jenny—Frank's mother. He knows now who Frank is, and he's gone to look for him in the chalk-pit as you telegraphed him to do. Was the dream you had very terrible?" May asked in awe.

"Not so terrible as the reality when I woke and was told that Iris was dying."

"But I'm sure Frank will be all right," May insisted.

"What does it matter who's all right and who's not at this moment?" Coral cried. "The only thing that matters is that I am losing my baby, and all these things—Frank, you, my father, your sister—are nothing to me now. We are all to blame. I myself most of all, and between us we have killed my baby."

"But she may get better, Coral. Doctors are often wrong."

"Oh, don't try to console me, Aunt May, or I shall go mad. I don't want consolation. Do you think I'm losing a watch or a ring? No, I'm losing my baby. Think what it means to hate the words that another person speaks, because each word takes a fraction of time away from the little that is left. Think what it means

Love and Death

to hear somebody tap at the door and tell you that it's getting late. Oh, don't I know how late it's getting? Don't I know? . . . Aunt May, leave me, please, there's a dear, and forgive me if I've said anything unkind. But leave me, leave me with her."

"I wouldn't have said anything about Frank," May sobbed. "But you seemed so anxious when you sent that telegram, and I thought it would relieve your mind to hear that he hadn't had your letter, and it wasn't that he wouldn't come."

"For a moment I wanted him to see her before she died," Coral said. "But now I want nobody to see her except myself. I'm jealous even of anybody else's looking at her."

May went humbly from the room; and all that night Coral sat by the bed counting those sighing breaths. The dawn broke wet and grey. It seemed to Coral that Iris was much paler even than yesterday.

About half-past eight the double-knock of a telegraph boy reverberated through the house. Iris opened her eyes.

"Oh, hark!" she whispered, and made an effort to raise her forefinger.

"My lamb, it's only Mr. Postman."

There was no response.

"Baby darling! Darling! Sweetheart! Look at mother a tiny moment. Iris!"

There was no response.

"Open your eyes one tiny, tiny little moment, my baby girl."

There was no response.

CHAPTER LXVI

LOVE AND LIFE

MAY came in with an open telegram in her hand.

"Coral, here's a telegram from your father to say that there was no sign of Frank in the chalk-pit."

"There's no sign of my baby in this room," Coral said, not offering to take the piece of paper from May.

"Why, what's the matter? Why are you speaking so funny? Coral, the kid isn't . . .?"

Coral nodded slowly.

From that moment she did not speak for hours, neither to the doctor when he came nor to Mrs. Kedge nor to her aunt. She sat dry-eyed with less expression upon her frozen countenance than if she had been an effigy of stone set up above the tomb of her child. The only movement she made was sometimes to bend over and listen to the silent heart as if she fancied that by the force of her grief she had brought back the fled spirit to the body lying there and was expecting that silent heart to beat again.

Mrs. Kedge and May debated together what they ought to do to combat this petrification of all her emotion.

"If she'd only cry," Mrs. Kedge lamented. "But there's not so much as the glisten of a tear in the corner of her eye. If she don't manage to cry soon, she'll either go mad or die herself, that's my opinion."

"I talked to her a bit about the poor kid," May said. "You know? I said how pretty she was, and how pretty her hair curled, and did she remember her saying this

and that, and how she flung away the puffer I once gave her; but she only looked at me, and in the end I got scared and come out of the room."

"I talked to her too," Mrs. Kedge said. "But it wasn't no more use than if I'd been talking to an image. I told her how our Tommy had burst into tears when I told him about poor little Irish—and how he'd gone off to school with a crape band round his sleeve. But she never paid not a bit of attention. Just sat staring in front of her like I've seen a blind man stare."

"Perhaps when her father arrives she'll cry," May said.

"Oh, her father's coming, is he?"

"I hope he is. I sent him a telegram to say what had happened."

"And her husband, isn't he coming?" Mrs. Kedge asked, hoping for the solution of a mystery that had caused many arguments between her and Mr. Kedge.

"Well, of course, he'd be here in a minute if he knew," May said. "But he's been away the last week, and we haven't been able to let him know."

"Oh, dear, what a pity! Well, I always say it never rains but what it pours," commented Mrs. Kedge, outwardly sympathetic, but inwardly triumphant, for she was now more positive than ever that Coral's husband was in prison.

About seven o'clock that evening, under a sky rapidly clearing, Maurice arrived in a car.

"I've found Frank," he told May.

"You have? Oh, Maurice, where is he? Wouldn't he come even now?"

"He would have come if he could, but he has been badly smashed up. Apparently his flying apparatus was at once a great success and a terrible failure. It carried him ten miles the other side of Trowbury, and then let

Coral

him down badly. He has been lying in a remote farmhouse for the last week, unconscious most of the time, with both legs broken and his right arm. How he wasn't killed is a miracle. He wants Coral very badly. Do you think she'll be able to leave the child?"

"But, Maurice, didn't you get my telegram to say that Iris died this morning?"

"No, I came straight here from Frank."

"Maurice, do try and make Coral go to him. If she doesn't have something to take her out of herself I know she'll go mad. She's been sitting all day staring in front of her, never crying, never moving, never speaking a word."

"Oh, May, will there ever be an end of our sorrows? And all of them brought about by me."

He went upstairs to Coral, who was still sitting as May had described her.

"Coral, my child!" he cried.

She did not turn her head to greet him, but sat staring before her in that same frozen muteness.

"How sweet she is!" Maurice murmured, looking tenderly down at the body of Iris. "And to think that I never saw her when she was alive!"

He turned his head to see if this regret had drawn a tear from Coral; but she sat dry-eyed, apparently quite oblivious of what he had said.

"Coral, I've just come from Frank. He was smashed up on his last flight. Very badly smashed up."

"Go on," said Coral in the echo of a human voice. "I have no grief left. If he is dead too, you can tell me."

"No, no, he's not dead, and with proper care he's not likely to die. But he wants you."

"He wants me?" she repeated. Then she smiled. "Oh no, he doesn't want me. I wrote to him and begged him to come when Baby was ill first. And he never came."

Love and Life

He preferred his wings. But however high he may fly," she said in that frightening echo of a human voice, "he will never be able to fly to her. He will never see her again. Never! Never! He has lost her. And I have lost her too."

"Coral, I can't have explained myself properly. He did not get your letter. This accident happened a week ago, and he has been lying smashed up in a remote farmhouse. The people told me that the only word he said when he came to his senses for a moment was 'Coral.' Then he became unconscious once more, and it was only yesterday afternoon about three o'clock that he recovered consciousness again, and again the first word he said was 'Coral.' "

"Father, are you speaking the truth, or are you telling me a lie to distract my mind from Baby? "

"The truth, my dearest child, the truth. Could I lie to you at such a moment in the presence of that little thing who has paid with her life for so much bitterness, whose death will be a wanton cruelty unless by her death she can join again two hearts that have beaten apart too long, two hearts that, as I of all men know, were destined to beat as one. Coral, go to him now. The car will take you there and bring you back. Remember, he does not know yet that your child is dead. I will stay here and watch by her while you are gone. Grant me that privilege. I will tell you one day why I ask it. And when I have told you, you will always be glad that you granted this to your father."

"He wants me," Coral repeated, and the echo seemed a little nearer to earth.

Maurice called to May when Coral had driven away into the starry twilight.

"Come and sit with me and watch."

Coral

They sat by the body of Iris in silence for a long time.

"I expect she's with Jenny now," said May, when three hours or more had passed.

"I hope so," Maurice whispered.

"She *will* love having her to play with," said May.

It was about this time that Coral came into the low-raftered room where Frank, swathed in bandages, lay in a great four-post bed.

"Frank, do you really want me?" she asked, standing in the doorway.

"Coral, there's never been a moment when I haven't wanted you. Let me explain how I came to be so mad. It was . . ."

"No, don't explain anything, my dear. I can't listen to any explanations yet, because Iris is dead. She just whispered 'Oh, hark!' and then she died."

"Coral, my poor darling, come to me!"

When she came to him, he drew her head down with his uninjured arm to lie upon his breast. At last in a merciful fountain the tears flowed, and those two riven hearts beat as one again.

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